

IMPERIAL VOGUE: PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE FASHIONING  
OF MODERNITY IN TWENTIETH CENTURY ETHIOPIA

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# IMPERIAL VOGUE: PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE FASHIONING OF MODERNITY IN TWENTIETH CENTURY ETHIOPIA

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During the early to mid-twentieth century, the Ethiopian cityscape changed dramatically, and as the urban space changed, so did its citizens' experiences of their own bodies within it. This new space affected life in Ethiopia from numerous perspectives: the modern Ethiopian citizen's understanding of his place within the nation, his interactions with the buildings, streets, and people around him, the employment opportunities presented to him in the city. One of the most visible changes that occurred during this time was the adoption of new styles of dressing the modern body.

This study explores the role of photography and clothing in Ethiopia during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie I (1930-1974). Through a consideration of the history of photography in Africa, the construction of the fashion system, and the role of the mass media in Ethiopia, this project examines how clothing was a vital aspect of urban Ethiopians' negotiations with modernity. Emperor Haile Selassie, who played a pivotal role in modernizing the nation, likewise positioned himself and his public appearance as a model for the Ethiopian public. In doing so, the emperor and his immediate family functioned as exemplars of the citizens of a modern nation. Photographs of the royal family, which appeared in newspapers and magazines, not only presented Haile Selassie and his children as fashionable subjects, but these images also functioned as guidelines for "properly" negotiating a relationship with modernity.

Through a comprehensive study of photographs, newspapers and magazines housed in the archives at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, this project brings together important theories from numerous disciplines. It considers the history of photography and the politics of vision as it specifically relates to the African continent and fashion as a system that developed *in* Ethiopia rather than one that was merely borrowed from the West. In addition to navigating a new way of understanding the role of fashion in a rapidly modernizing non-Western nation, this project simultaneously explores the ways in which photographs, particularly portraits, function as fashionable images within a given social context.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Julia Kim Werts began her post-secondary education at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland where she double majored in Cultural Anthropology and the Writing Seminars. Her interest in African art began with a course on the anthropology of art that explored the social and cultural context in which art is produced versus that in which it is viewed. While in college, she interned at the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. for two summers, during which she also conducted research for her honor's thesis on the politics of displaying non-Western art in Western institutions.

Upon graduating from Johns Hopkins University in 2001, Julia started her graduate studies at Cambridge University in Cambridge, England where she received an M.Phil in Social Anthropology and the Work of a Museum. During her time at Cambridge, she organized an exhibition at the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology on South African crafts made of recycled objects. In addition to her thesis, which focused on the appropriation and representation of artworks by contemporary African artists, Julia began to explore her interests in the visual role of the body in society.

After completing the M.Phil, Julia made the shift from the anthropology of art to the history of art. As a Ph.D. candidate in the history of art, she explored modern and contemporary art in Africa, focusing on photography and clothing in representations of the human form. Additionally, she examined the role of the mass media, particularly fashion photography, as it affects identity at national, social and personal levels.

*For Damian*

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## NOTES ON THE TEXT

The Ethiopian calendar differs significantly from the Gregorian. The years are seven to eight years later in the Ethiopian calendar, depending on whether it is before or after the beginning of the Gregorian year in January, and anywhere between six to eleven days later, depending on which month of the year. The dates have been converted in accordance with the Gregorian calendar; however, any instances where the only information available is the year in the Ethiopian calendar, the conversion to the Gregorian calendar has been made with a range of two possible years.

Family names in Ethiopia are passed down from the father to his children; however, his *first* name, rather than his last name, is given to his children. For example, the emperor was born Tafari Makonnen to his father Makonnen Woldemikael Gudessa. *Ras* Tafari later took the name Haile Selassie when he was crowned emperor. In the following generation, the emperor's children assumed their father's name, Haile Selassie. Therefore, his youngest son Prince Sahle Selassie's full name is Sahle Selassie Haile Selassie, and his son (Haile Selassie's grandson) is Ermias Sahle Selassie. In this text, people are referred to by their first names rather than the Western convention of using last/family names. Additionally, bibliographic references to Ethiopian authors are alphabetized according to their first names.

The phonetic spelling of Ethiopian names has been standardized in the text. If alternate spellings are also commonly used, they are noted in the footnotes the first time the name is mentioned.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Introduction**

#### **Portraits as Fashion**

From anthropological inquiries into dressing the body to historical narratives of fashion as well as psychoanalytic theories of the relationship between the self and its image, adorning the physical body has recently become the subject of a wide range of academic discourse. With roots in anthropological studies of body decorating practices in non-Western cultures,<sup>1</sup> contemporary investigations of the ways in which people embellish and adorn the surface of their bodies tend to be self-contained, maintaining strict boundaries between the nature of dressing the body as a personal pursuit and the role of clothing as a communicative instrument on the social level. The separation between clothing as a means of self-identity formation and clothing as a culturally instituted system leads to a number of different problems within a comprehensive study of “fashioning” the body. Where do the distinctions lie? How do we delineate those distinctions? Certainly, there is a moment when the personal self and the social self intersect. How do we negotiate that intersection?

Additionally, these boundaries tend to mark the distinction between the Western “fashion system” and non-Western forms of body decoration. Existing research on fashioning the body or the image of the body has often been limited to either fashion history in the West or anthropological investigations into the body-adorning practices of the cultural “other”. Consequently, the question of photographing the fashionable body and the Western notion of “fashion” in

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<sup>1</sup> In terms of seminal anthropological scholarship on body decorating practices, I am referring to the works of scholars such as Marilyn Strathern and Mary Douglas, whose work I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 2.

photography are rarely applied to non-Western cultures. The fashion system is often considered by fashion historians to be a specifically Western, specifically modern phenomenon that has firm roots in the Industrial Revolution. Both Gilles Lipovetsky, a philosopher, and Elizabeth Wilson, a fashion historian, discuss the development of the “fashion system” as a Western enterprise in that the specific social and economic conditions of the West were necessary elements for its creation as well as its perpetuation.<sup>2</sup> However, how can the fact that fashion—the practice of adorning, elaborating, embellishing the human body—exists in every corner of the world be overlooked? Whether the “fashion system” is defined as a Western enterprise, the reality of a global influence and/or direct exchange of raw materials, of ideas and of styles cannot be overlooked because at its most basic, “fashion” is like any other system of communication. Fashion functions as a visual expression of social and cultural as well as personal desires whether through photographs or in person.<sup>3</sup>

Inquiries into the social significance of fashion and clothing are often considered in isolation from the very vehicle that makes it a *visible* cultural phenomenon—the photographic image and the politics of viewing the image. A significant and dynamic factor that fuels the fashion industry is situated firmly within the visual realm, particularly in print media (though as technologies have advanced over the years, television and internet now play considerably larger roles). In traditional art historical scholarship, the question of whether or not photography can be considered an artistic medium seems to have simply faded away.<sup>4</sup> However, the

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<sup>2</sup> See Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) and Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: Virago Press, 1985; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, in *The Fashion System*, states that vision is flawed and unreliable; therefore, we are unable to fully comprehend vision as a tool of communication. However, Barthes specifically refers to written fashion in the form of text about fashion in magazines. For more, see Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (NY: Hill and Wang, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of photography’s status as art, see Martha Rosler, “Lookers, Buyers, Dealers and Makers: Thoughts on Audience,” *Exposure*, XVII: 1, 10-25.

involvement of art history with the history of photography has typically been confined to instances in which the photographic images most closely resembles traditional art practices with regards to intent, modes of production, stylistic and aesthetic affinities, and methods of presentation. This tendency has pushed aside opportunities for critical consideration of *how* the vast majority of photographs that are circulated for mass consumption are experienced.

Fashion photography as a field of inquiry is a newly developing area of academic analysis, and as such, it has been limited to the ways in which viewers—the public, particularly women—identify with the models or bodies in the images.<sup>5</sup> Studies of fashion photography have been less about the clothing pictured than they have the role images of women play in identity formation. Though these groundbreaking analyses of how viewing images of the dressed body have made major contributions to the understanding of the function of photography, these studies also bring to the surface major gaps and discontinuities within the fields of art history, the history of photography, visual studies, and of the ways that psychoanalytic theories have been applied to understanding identity formation via the *visual* construction of the world.

Recently, cultural theorists have begun to re-conceptualize psychoanalysis in terms of the cultural “Other”, bringing the marginalized self from the periphery to the center. Ranjana Khanna, in *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (2003), calls attention to the fact that psychoanalysis, like ethnology and archaeology, came from the same episteme as colonialism and was contaminated with the same racism and ethnocentricity. Drawing from Franz Fanon’s seminal work *Black Skin, White Mask* (1967), recent scholarship has focused on how identity formation is affected by

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<sup>5</sup> See Leslie W. Rabine, “A Woman’s Two Bodies: Fashion Magazines, Consumerism and Feminism” and Diana Fuss, “Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look,” eds. Shari Benstock and Susanne Ferriss, *On Fashion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

the trauma of colonialism and consequently, the processes of decolonization and neo-colonialism.<sup>6</sup> These inquiries into de-centered theories of identity formation have been and continue to be crucial to studies of non-Western cultures and diasporic communities whether directly or indirectly affected by colonial agenda. Perhaps one of the most influential recent developments that has motivated interest in African photography is postmodernism, which provides the theoretical framework for much of the current anthropological and art historical discourse. Postmodernism's emphasis on reflexivity and its awareness and critical investigations of modes of representation of the Other has made it a useful field of inquiry for scholars of African visual culture. At the same time, postmodernist scholars have shown the greatest interest in postcard images, what Christraud Geary describes as "the ultimate 'frozen stereotypes' and the greatest enigma when it comes to using photographic material as historical sources."<sup>7</sup> Postcards reiterate and support the fascinations of their creators and viewers, thus revealing how the image of Africa was created during the colonial period.

In imperial Ethiopia, where colonialism was never fully institutionalized, specters of European dominance did manage to manifest themselves in various ways. However, as a country that maintained its independence during the "Scramble for Africa," the role of the monarchy and the social uses of photography provide a unique portal into investigations of the concept of self-fashioning and its relationship with modernity. Photographs of Emperor Haile Selassie<sup>8</sup> proliferated in the mass media

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<sup>6</sup> See Edward Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors," *Critical Inquiry* 15:2 (Winter 1989): 205-25; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" and Abdul JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature" in *Race, Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Homi Bhabha, "Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism" in *The Politics of Theory*, ed. Francis Barker (Colchester: University of Essex, 1983); Homi Bhabha, "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition," foreword, *Black Skin, White Mask*, by Franz Fanon, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Christraud Geary, "Old Pictures, New Approaches: Researching Historical Photographs," *African Arts* 24:4 (October 1991) 37.

<sup>8</sup> Alternate spellings: Haile Sellassie, Haile Sellasie, Hayla-Sellase

throughout his forty-four year reign. In the 1930s, images of the emperor and his family were the most common photographs published, thus the most readily available to the public. The emperor's photograph appeared in nearly every issue of every publication, both Amharic and English, and until the 1940s, the same handful of portraits was printed on a regular basis. In later years (1960s and 1970s), press photographs of the emperor engaging in official state business became more common than formal portraits in newspapers. Portraits were usually reserved for special issue publications such as those celebrating birthdays and anniversaries. Whether through magazines or newspapers and later television, images of the royal family dominated visual media in Ethiopia throughout the mid-twentieth century.

However, a study of the “imaging” of an imperial empire brings to light the problem of power *within* Ethiopia, an issue that is quite significant when considering that recent scholarship on the representation and interpretation of the marginalized non-West is so often centered on the struggle for destabilizing institutionalized oppression and the imbalance of power. Although the purpose of this project is to consider the ways in which images of the Ethiopian royal family specifically functioned as subversive agents, it is also important to keep in mind that for a significant portion of the country's population, the ruling class brought them into the imperial social system as a conquered people, subject to control and subordination. The agents of empire controlled both domestic and foreign issues that affected the populations subject to imperial rule. On one hand, photographs and the dressed bodies within them functioned as a means of asserting the power and autonomy of a nation emerging into the international arena. On the other hand, those same images affected change among the general population, serving as instructive and coercive images of the ruling class in proper, modern attire.



In many instances, photographs of the emperor served as social and political propaganda both in and out of Ethiopia. Although Emperor Haile Selassie's national and international agendas are certainly important and often central to the discussion of the ways in which he fashioned himself and "sold" the image of both monarchy and modernity to the public, this project is by no means an inquiry into the validity of those agendas and the successes or failures of his attempts to modernize Ethiopia during the twentieth century. Rather, in this paper, I raise social and cultural questions in relation to the photograph: How did these images function as markers of a newly emerging urban identity? More specifically, how did the ways in which the subjects of the photographs dressed themselves negotiate the Ethiopian relationship with modernity and the development of an Ethiopian modernity itself?

The question of photography in Ethiopia, as it is in any other place, is a complex one, and an investigation of its social history, beginning as early as 1859, opens numerous doors of opportunity for understanding the changes in Ethiopian culture and politics during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The implications and consequences of photographic technologies in Ethiopia are not limited to the "fashioning" of modern bodies. This paper addresses a narrow aspect of photography within a very unique social and political climate. Though it does discuss a wider history of photography in Ethiopia, the scope of this project is limited to examining images of a particular group of people and the ways in which those people negotiated their personal relationships with the rapidly modernizing world around them.

The subject of this paper was borne out of the combination of two distinctly different interests: one in portrait photographs from Africa and the other fashion photography from Western popular culture. Although today, fashion photographs as well as other images of contemporary trends and celebrity lifestyles are readily

available all over the world, my interests in fashion photographs were specifically focused on examining the how and the why of viewers' (particularly women) overwhelming fascinations with what is essentially a carefully constructed fantasy world. In the winter of 2005, I took a brief research trip to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia to survey the photographic archives at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University where I came across a similar phenomenon. In the mid-twentieth century as Ethiopia was emerging as a member of the international arena, the pages of Ethiopian newspapers and magazines were packed with images of Emperor Haile Selassie I and his family. The photographs ranged from formal portraits in both traditional and Western-styled royal regalia to snapshots of the family in more casual, everyday wear.

During the emperor's reign, these images functioned in much the same way that the photographs in today's glossy fashion magazines do in terms of how they are viewed and internalized by their viewers. However, in Ethiopia, the politics of viewing and of being seen through photographs were emerging at the same time that Ethiopians were beginning to negotiate a new relationship with modernity. In terms of the visual construction of modernity, paved roads, the architecture of new buildings and monuments, and the increase in motor vehicles all transformed the urban landscape—the physical space in which urban Ethiopians lived. On the other hand, photographs in the media, and more specifically portraits provided the “guidelines” for how the body, and thus the self, should navigate this new, *modern* terrain. In this way, portrait photographs functioned as fashionable images, as they were vital to *fashioning* the modern, urban citizen.

As I investigated thousands of photographs of the emperor, focusing on the various manners in which the image of his physical body captured and signified his role as a monarch, a public figure, an international politician, a religious figure, and an activist, it became clear that the emperor himself invested a great deal of time and

effort into his public appearance and the types of clothing he chose to wear. One of the most revealing instances came at the time of the Italian invasion and the emperor's exile to England. Figure 1.1 shows the emperor and his two eldest sons on 4 May 1936 as they depart Djibouti on their way to England. The emperor is dressed primarily in traditional fashion, although the legs of his white slacks are wider than the traditional white pants worn under the *shama* by men [see Figure 4.1]. His hat, similar in style to the hat worn by the French colonial official walking next to the emperor, is a hybrid of a traditional Ethiopian hat, which has a more angular crown, and the round European military dress uniform hat. With white gloves covering his hands and white shoes on his feet, Haile Selassie's body is enshrouded in the color of traditional Ethiopian clothing.<sup>9</sup>

Less than a month later when the emperor and his family disembark at the seaport in Southampton, his clothing changes considerably [Figure 1.2]. Although he still wears a traditional cloak, slacks, a *shama* underneath his cloak, and a hat, the dark colors of the cloak and slacks more closely aligns his attire with Western-styled men's suits. The large-brimmed, round hat has also been replaced with a fashionable fedora that he is in the process of tipping as this photograph was taken. In addition to the contrasting colors, the clothes appear to fit his body more closely than the outfit he wore in Djibouti. The *shama* is wrapped more tightly, his pants are not as loose, and his cloak is slightly shorter. The simple fact that the emperor was aware of his appearance at a time when he was fleeing his war-torn country and had spent nearly a month in transit to England attests to the importance that he placed on his self-presentation. A close reading of photographs of Haile Selassie, particularly portraits,

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<sup>9</sup> The cloak that Emperor Haile Selassie wears in this image is the same cloak that he is photographed in while in Jerusalem. See Figure 4.7.

throughout his reign reveal the ways in which he transformed himself and adapted to various social and cultural situations.

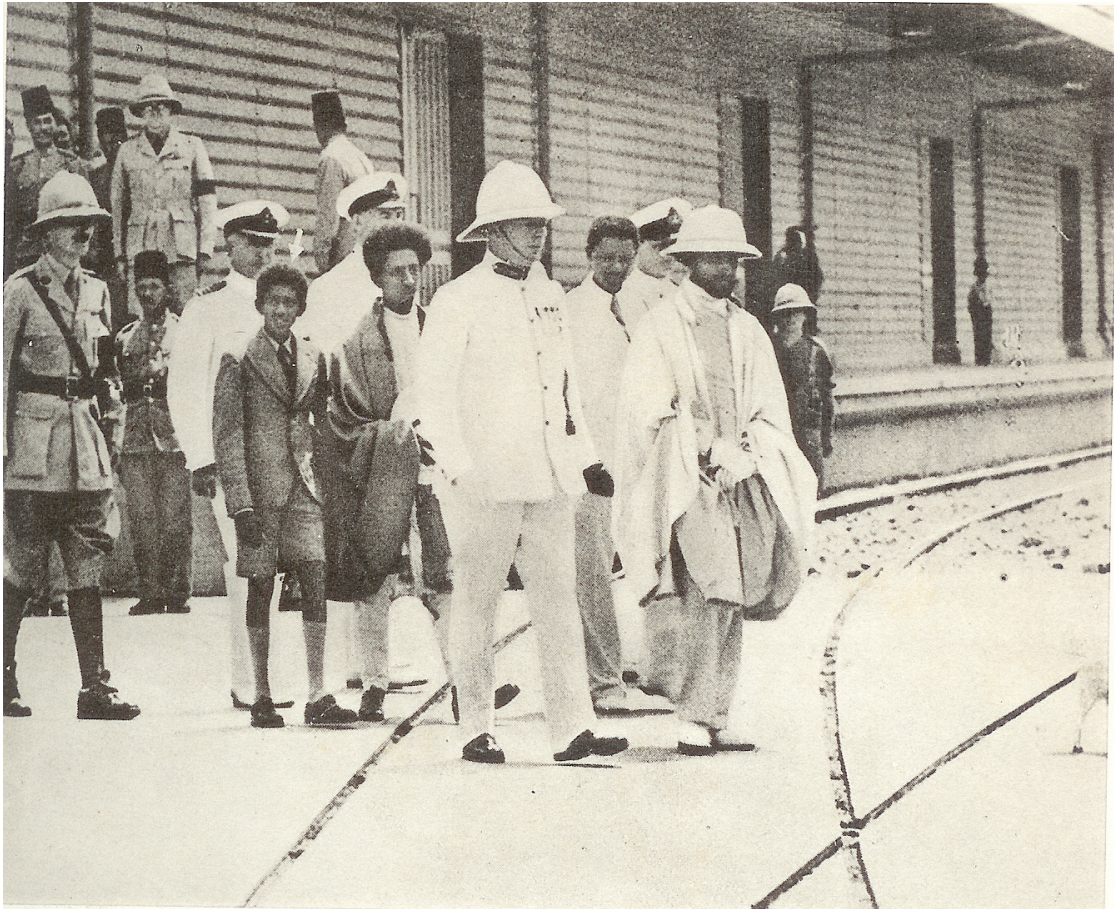


Figure 1.1: Emperor Haile Selassie and his sons Crown Prince Asfa Wosen<sup>10</sup> and Prince Makonnen in Djibouti on their way to England via Jerusalem

Photographer Unknown, Djibouti, 4 May 1936

Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

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<sup>10</sup> Alternate spellings: Asfaw Wossen, Asfa Wasen



Figure 1.2: Emperor Haile Selassie, *Ras Kassa Hailu*,<sup>11</sup> *Hakim Worqenah Eshate*<sup>12</sup> and Crown Prince Asfa Wosen upon their arrival at Southampton  
Photographer Unknown, England, 3 June 1936  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

The primary sources for this study come from archival research of photographic images that were seen in newspapers, magazines and other print media from the beginning of the twentieth century into the 1970s.<sup>13</sup> In addition to images that appeared in the print media, I draw from personal and/or family snapshots and publicity photographs (primarily of the royal family) that are housed in the photographic archives at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University. My research was conducted during two separate trips to Ethiopia, the first in

<sup>11</sup> Alternate spelling: Kasa Haylu

<sup>12</sup> Alternate spellings: Warqenah Ishate

<sup>13</sup> Although the moving picture was introduced to Ethiopia during Haile Selassie's reign and was certainly a significant aspect of what I refer to as the "fashioning" of the modern subject, the focus of this paper is on the fixed image.

December 2005 and the second from November 2006 through February 2007. To supplement the photographs from the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, I also rely on images that were available in the American and European media during the same time frame, primarily from the archives of the Library of Congress. The challenge of investigating these photographs has largely been centered on the reliability of existing information about the images. Examining thousands of images, some properly identified and many others providing inaccurate or incomplete information, a great deal of my time was spent pulling the pieces together in order to create an accurate visual timeline and history of the Ethiopian royal family.

The archives at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies provide a rich and comprehensive photographic history of modern Ethiopia, but from a collection, preservation, and research perspective, the lack of a consistent, reliable, and secure system of cataloging and preserving the images proves to be a major obstacle. Images have been damaged by rusted paper clips, folded to fit into envelopes, bundled together with rubber bands, and stuffed into boxes. Numerous photographs that I had seen during my first visit were missing or had been misplaced. A project to digitize the images and provide an electronic database for researchers has recently begun but is years from completion. Additionally, aside from the immediate members of the royal family, there is very little continuity and accuracy in the identification of other public figures and high officials. A vast majority of the images are not dated, and with the exception of photographs taken by privately operated studios, the names of photographers are also unknown.

Additionally, the organizational hierarchy of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies also made the access and reproduction of certain images challenging. Although I was granted approval to make reproductions of individual images within the photographic archives for the purpose of this particular project, obtaining images from newspapers

and magazines housed within the library was not possible. A significant portion of this project relies on images that were available to the general public in the form of the mass media; however, those photographs *within that specific context* are not available as reproductions in this dissertation. Specific issues and page numbers of newspapers and magazines are referred to throughout the paper, but the images themselves have not been presented.

My research experience with images from the Library of Congress was likewise challenging in many respects. Although the photographs and negatives are well preserved and often accessible in digital form on the internet, there have been minimal efforts to identify these images as anything more than “Ethiopian” or “Abyssinian.” Photographs of Emperor Haile Selassie I, who was perhaps one of the most recognizable Africans worldwide from the 1930s to the 1960s, have been identified with his name, but also they provide additional information that is grossly inaccurate [See Figure 4.5].

In the same collection of photographs and negative plates, the emperor’s daughter Princess Tsehai,<sup>14</sup> who often traveled with her father and was an international figure until her death in 1942, is merely labeled “Ethiopian Woman.” Additionally, the image is identified as having been created sometime between 1898 and 1946, a time span of nearly five decades [Figure 1.3]. The inaccuracy of dating this image, and others like it, points to a wider problem of historically situating Africa within a stagnant and timeless cultural vacuum. The photographs from this particular collection are identified as having come from the American Colony Photo Department, a Christian sect of religious pilgrims that immigrated to Jerusalem in the late 1800s. The American Colony disbanded in 1932 and was taken over by the Matson Photo Service, which continued to provide photographs of and from Jerusalem for publications

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<sup>14</sup> Alternate spellings: Tsehay, Tsahay



around the world into the 1950s.<sup>15</sup> The range of dates placed on the photograph of Princess Tsehai basically cover the entire time frame that either the American Colony Photo Department or Matson Photo Service was in existence, even though there are numerous and obvious signifiers that suggest a particular time. The fact that the young woman is dressed in Western style clothing narrows the time period significantly. A cursory glance at Western fashion would easily indicate that the photograph was taken sometime between the late 1920s or 1930s. The Library of Congress used existing information that was available on the negatives and their storage sleeves as well as additional information provided by the Matsons to catalog the collection. It seems unlikely that the Matson Photo Service photographers were unaware of the significance of the people they were photographing, but it is interesting to note that though Haile Selassie was named, no one else in his family was identified nor were the images dated.

At the same time, the challenges of researching Ethiopian photographs have also proved to be an exciting endeavor. Because a comprehensive study of these images has never been completed before, I was in the unique position of drawing from a nearly endless supply of visual material that has received very little scholarly attention. Together with the oppressive military regime that controlled the country from 1974 to 1987 and imposed harsh restrictions on, among many others, the acquisition of knowledge, access to these materials has only recently become available to researchers, particularly those from outside the country. Aside from a handful of images that historians have pulled from these collections to supplement their text-based histories, there have been little to no attempts to explore the rich and dynamic stories told by the images themselves.

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<sup>15</sup> The G. Eric and Edith Matson Photographic Collection is now housed at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.





Figure 1.3: Princess Tsehai  
Matson Photo Service, Jerusalem, 1936  
Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, [LC-M32-52470-x]

Though the subject of this study specifically examines photographs from imperial Ethiopia, this project is essentially an examination of the point where dressing the body and photographing the dressed body intersect. I rely on photographs and print media as primary material, but the scope of the paper extends beyond the image itself. Because the visual processes of reading a photograph and reading the clothed body are different in many respects, this study includes a strong consideration of the theoretical aspects of being an image and of seeing an image. Rather than considering “fashion” as a system separate from the process of viewing the body, I am adamant that in order to appreciate the entirety of the personal and social significance of the *clothed* body, investigating the interaction between clothing and the photographed body is fundamental.

Although this study uses a particular time and place as the subject of inquiry, my intention is not only to demonstrate the particular processes that made photography and clothing important to the visual culture of Ethiopia in the mid-twentieth century. The primary purpose of this project is to deconstruct the ways in which fashioning the body in portraits as an *embodied* experience were central to the formation of a “modern” identity in Ethiopia during the years of Emperor Haile Selassie’s reign. However, the study also addresses the unique role of photography in a non-colonial state, the problems inherent in contemporary discourse on fashion and fashion theory, and the politics of dressing the body as well as viewing the dressed body. Thus, the goal of this paper is wide-ranging. In examining fashion in photographic portraiture, my intention is to open the channels for discussion of the many shortcomings in contemporary discourse on African photography, fashion and the body.

Because of the scope of this paper as well as the limitations of existing work on fashion and photography, I am charged with the task of bringing together two distinctly different disciplines within this project. Attempting to organize a study that not only brings fashion and photography together, but also Western and non-Western politics of imagining and viewing images is certainly a challenge, and it has proven to be the most problematic aspect of this analysis. Therefore, despite my desires to erase the boundaries between disciplines, in order to navigate the various threads that bind this study together, this paper is organized thematically. The first part of this paper explores the foundational theories upon which the study is built. It addresses the history of photography and image-making in Africa as well as the particularities of their development in the Ethiopian context. Additionally, this section examines the fashion system and the politics of dress, focusing on issues that are important in considering “fashion” outside of the Western context. Both fashion and photography are discussed in relation to “modernity” and commodity as they relate to print culture in imperial Ethiopia.

Although the connections between photography and fashion are quite obvious in contemporary society, their mutual reliance developed over several decades as the fields of photography and fashion changed rapidly during the second half of the nineteenth century. The language of the photograph emerged at the same time that the fashion system was becoming a vital part of public life in the modern world; thus, the relationship between the two, as well as their histories, inevitably became closely intertwined. However, inquiries into the relationship between the photograph and fashion are largely absent from critical discourse.

Attempting to build upon a discussion that has only just recently begun, Chapters 2 and 3 of this project put forth the foundational theories that informed my research and developed my understanding of how fashion functioned through

photographs specifically in the context of imperial Ethiopia. Chapter 2 begins with a brief overview of photography as well as the development of portraiture as a means of self-representation in Africa. Additionally, this chapter examines the importance of vision or ways of seeing in the consumption of images. Through an exploration of the distinct characteristics of photography in Africa, I examine the role of photographic portraiture as an agent of modernity, beginning in earnest in the 1930s as photography became more accessible to a wider audience. As an “agent” of modernity, I draw from anthropologist Alfred Gell’s examination of the agency of objects, and I assert that the photographic image itself carries with it a unique power of sorts that is in turn conveyed to the viewer. The subject of the photograph communicates his/her own agency through the image as well, but the image itself carries and communicates its own distinct messages.

The third chapter similarly explores the foundational theories of creating the fashionable, social body as a specifically modern, embodied practice. Both Chapter 2 and 3 rely on theories that were borne in and of Western societies; thus, much of the challenge lies in re-negotiating, re-constructing, and sometimes re-thinking established theories on fashion and photography. It becomes apparent in these chapters that there has been a great deal more investigation into the role of photography in Africa, particularly under the oppressive hand of colonialism, than that of fashion in Africa. Under the umbrella of “modernity” and the self-reflexive criticism of “post-modernity,” fashion has managed to remain almost exclusively within a Western history and framework. Despite the difficulties, Chapters 2 and 3 attempt to provide a modest foundation for situating imperial Ethiopia within a viable and active fashion system.

The second half of this project draws upon the theoretical foundations discussed in the first half. Taking into account the specificities of the role of fashion

and photography in the African context, I explore the relationship between the Ethiopian monarchy and modernity as it manifested in a particularly *visual* context. Following a brief discussion of the major factors that led to Ethiopia's unique position in the international area during the early twentieth century, I position images of the country's monarchy within a framework similar to that of James Ryan's discussion of Queen Victoria in *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (1997). However, beyond the context of powerful Western institutions and governments, the Ethiopian struggle for recognition as an independent and *modern* nation is an issue of significant importance in the country's leaders' presentation of self.

Drawing from a range of critical works on objects, art and agency, the meaning and ambiguity of the photograph, and the construction of vision, Chapters 4 and 5 explore the unique role of photographs and their "fashionable" agency in the Ethiopian context. Chapter 4 considers images of Emperor Haile Selassie I, the most photographed and *visibly* accessible body in Ethiopian history, and explores the visual construction of the Ethiopian monarchy through the body of the emperor. This investigation includes images from within Ethiopia as well as those that were seen in the American and European public because in many ways, Haile Selassie's larger-than-life persona was created as direct result of the country's interactions with foreign nations.

Expanding beyond the emperor's clothes, the following chapter looks at the next generation of Ethiopian royalty. Haile Selassie's sons, daughters, their spouses and children democratized fashion to an extent that the emperor and his wife were never able to achieve. Images of the emperor's children introduced a wider variety of styles, both in terms of photography and of clothing, to the public, and they presented themselves as being far more accessible to the people than the emperor. Additionally,

their extensive travels and often long-term residencies in European cities strongly influenced their experience of the embodiment of the fashions they brought back to Ethiopia in person and in photographs. In considering the role of the monarchy and of portraits in fashioning modernity in twentieth century Ethiopia, I take into account both private and public images—portraits of the royal family that were meant for personal or limited consumption as well as portraits that were distributed to the media for mass consumption.

Additionally, I investigate the implications of displaying and “publicizing” the private through portraits. Though the distinctions between the private and the public are significant, there are also numerous points where the two intersect or collapse, bringing the two worlds together in a precarious space that sprang into existence within an extremely short period of time. In much the same way, the distinctions between Western and non-Western, modern and traditional became increasingly blurred during the years of Haile Selassie’s reign. As the movement of people, ideas, values and traditions moved with increased fluidity in and out of the country’s borders, Ethiopia’s identity on the international front became closely related to what Europeans and Americans considered nationalism or patriotism. As technologies advanced and wire services such as the Associated Press merged, powerful photographic images/evidence helped mark a distinction between “Ethiopia” and what people visualized as “the dark continent.”

Photographs such as the one of Abebech Cherqos [Figure 1.4], which was distributed by the Associated Press, presented images of Ethiopians that disrupted established stereotypes of the savage, uncivilized African in various states of *un*-dress, fighting with spears rather than guns. In this image, an Ethiopian woman described as “the founder of the Abyssinian Amazon Army,” openly asserts her subjectivity and simultaneously negates any attempts by either the photographer or the viewer to

objectify and “possess” her by confronting her viewers through the barrel of a gun *that is her own*. The placement of her left hand on the holster she wears at her side emphasizes her ownership of the weapon. The accompanying text reads:

A native woman who dreamed, a year ago, that she rode at the head of a legion of women to defend her country, is finding her dream realised. At first ridiculed, then supported, she founded an army of women who now number 3,000. Her Amharic name denotes “one who became a flower...The leader of Abyssinia’s Amazon army takes a cool aim through the sites of a revolver. A remarkable picture just received from Addis Ababa.<sup>16</sup>

At a time when most of Africa was still under colonial rule and the struggle for independence was just beginning to emerge, this photograph’s expressed purpose of portraying an empowered African woman was extremely unusual. Ethiopia was able to maintain a unique position in the international media, due in part, to images such as these. Photographs and other visual depictions of a powerful, independent nation were crucial to Ethiopia’s existence in the global imaginary. Additionally, these types of characterizations of Ethiopia beyond its borders trickled back into the country through the numerous Ethiopians who lived and studied abroad, and the support of Ethiopia’s sovereignty by people outside of Ethiopia was significant in shaping national identity and pride within the country.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Both the text and image are from the archives at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies. The exact circulation of this image is unknown; however, it *was* sent abroad and the identity of Abebech Cherqos is confirmed in William J. Makin, *War Over Ethiopia* (London: Jarolds Ltd., 1935), 200 and Angelo Del Boca, *The Ethiopian War, 1935-1941*, trans. P.D. Cummins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 40.

<sup>17</sup> The Abyssinian Association, based in England, was instrumental in commemorating the freedom of Ethiopia from Italian occupation and Emperor Haile Selassie’s return to the throne. On 5 May 1942, the Abyssinian Association prepared the “Allies Presentation Book” before a meeting held at the Central Hall in Westminster Abbey in support of Ethiopian independence.



Figure 1.4: Abebech Cherqos  
Associated Press Photo, Ethiopia, c. 1945  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University



Spanning more than forty years, Haile Selassie I—Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, King of Kings of Ethiopia, Elect of God, Power of Trinity the First, Emperor of Ethiopia—carefully constructed an image of himself and of his country that helped create a cohesive vision of an African nation, a country united by the common goal of modernization and through a shared religious and cultural history. This paper demonstrates that these “imagine-ary” pictures of Ethiopia, at times narcissistic, self-serving and inaccurate, nevertheless functioned as markers of identity and were central to how Ethiopians situated their modern, urban lives within a global context. This project additionally seeks to disrupt the commonly held perception that modernity was not a natural, organic process in the non-Western world. Brought by Europeans, the modernization process and its associated philosophical traditions are considered foreign to the social and political processes that existed prior to European contact. Thus, modernity in Africa is never quite “authentic.” However, Ethiopia’s negotiations with modernity began long before Haile Selassie became a figure of international importance and “[woke] up a land which had slept for 5,000 years.”<sup>18</sup>

The persona that the emperor portrayed to the public was one in which the emperor himself was highly invested. The visual representation of his authority as well as that of his relationship with the modernizing process was a carefully and precisely executed illustration of his role and Ethiopia’s role in the international arena. Through these images of the royal family, the Ethiopian public witnessed a visual transformation of the physical body that coincided with the rapid modernization occurring in urban centers. The metropolis transformed not only in the sense of paved roads, school and hospitals, but also in terms of how the body itself was situated within the shifting cityscape.

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<sup>18</sup> “Coronation,” *Time Magazine*, 3 November 1930, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171882370-100.html> (accessed 10 July 2007).

## CHAPTER TWO

### Theoretical and Methodological Framework: Photography

*Photography brought into being new configurations and articulations of the body, and new images of masculinity and femininity which intersect with older modes of representation to produce their own potent and transfiguring admixtures of modernity.<sup>19</sup>*

Abigail Solomon-Godeau

In January 1839, what was to eventually become known as the photograph was revealed to the public for the first time in an official bulletin of the French Academy of Sciences. The daguerreotype, named for its inventor Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, produced a physical replica of the image that had been captured by the *camera obscura* for centuries.<sup>20</sup> Just one month later, Henry Fox Talbot premiered a different process of producing a photographic image in London after word of Daguerre's invention had traveled across the English Channel. Over the next few decades, drastic improvements were made to the technologies that supported both the daguerreotype and Talbot's process, the calotype. Despite the cumbersome nature of the equipment and the often hazardous chemicals that were necessary to produce a photographic image, this new method of image-making quickly spread all over the world, consequently altering the constructions of vision, of communication, of self-representation and of expressions of the body.

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<sup>19</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Legs of the Countess," *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. William Pietz and Emily Apter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 270.

<sup>20</sup> As far back as the fifth century B.C.E, the *camera obscura* was used to create images with sunlight through a small hole in a darkened room. However, it was not until the sixteenth century that the *camera obscura* was improved by utilizing a simple lens.

This chapter explores photography in terms of how it affected change throughout the world, particularly in Africa. As a mode of visual representation that coincided with modernization, European exploration and subsequent colonization of non-Western countries, the history of photography is inherently intertwined with the construction of a “modern” vision of the self and the other. Throughout Africa, photography long functioned as a tool of colonialism, and the photographic image, in both direct and indirect ways, altered the perception of the physical body.

In addition to outlining the role of photography in Africa, this chapter discusses the development of a powerful tool of self-presentation and explores the ways in which the body, clothing, and the photographic image function simultaneously as an assertion of social and political ideals. Reading and interpreting photographs of African subjects requires a re-reading of the literature about Africans as well as the cultural history of photography. Alan Trachtenberg, in *Rereading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*, asserts that the rise of photography to a position of social text is significant in reading images today:

...photographs are not simple depictions but constructions...that the history they show is inseparable from the history they enact: a history of photographers employing their medium to make sense of their society. It is also a history of photographers seeking to define themselves, to create a role for photography as an American art...Consisting of images rather than words, photography places its own constraints on interpretation, requiring that photographers invent new forms of collaboration between image and text, between artist and audience.<sup>21</sup>

Photography plays a significant role in shaping ideas about identity and sense of self.

In a retrospective exploration of W.E.B. DuBois' *Exposition des Nègres d'Amerérique*

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<sup>21</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York, Noonday, 1989), xvi.

held at the Paris Exposition in 1900, Deborah Willis writes that photographs “informed African American social consciousness and motivated black people by offering an ‘other’ view of the black subject.”<sup>22</sup> Functioning as what she terms “subversive resistance,” Willis demonstrates how these “portraits of progress” shaped a new identity for African Americans at the turn of the century. The photographic image has held an influential and forceful cultural position throughout its history, and it has been used in countless capacities to affect change—political, social, religious and economic. The unique history of the photograph in Africa has been no less compelling.

### *Photography, Portraiture, and Colonialism in Africa*

The invention of photography coincided with the true beginnings of the European presence in Africa. After November 1839, photography enabled the visual documentation of the European invasion of African religion, politics, culture and economy. These images were transmitted to the Western world and left a lasting visual impression of the African continent. Photography reached the shores of Africa at different times, depending on the relationship between Europe and the given locale, but in almost all areas, photography quickly became an integral part of the colonial agenda.

Earlier in the nineteenth century, Europe’s relationship with Africa primarily involved trade and commerce, thus the majority of interaction was concentrated on or near coastal regions. However, by end of the century following the “Scramble for Africa,” Europeans had ventured into almost every part of the continent. Only months

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<sup>22</sup> Deborah Willis, “The Sociologists Eye: W.E.B. DuBois and the Paris Exhibition,” *A Small Nation of People: W.E.B. DuBois and African American Portraits of Progress* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 55.

after the release of the daguerreotype to the French public, daguerreotypists had taken this new technology to North Africa and the Middle East. By 1840, the photographic process had reached the southernmost shores of South Africa with the Cape of Good Hope being the easiest way for Europeans to reach India and Australia.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the established trade routes between Europe and Africa, technological innovations towards the end of the nineteenth century facilitated the circulation of images by transforming both the camera and the photograph into different material forms and media. For the first several decades following the unveiling of the daguerreotype, slow shutter speeds, bulky equipment and harsh environmental conditions made it difficult for European photographers to capture images of decent quality, and they frequently gave up the camera for the sketching pad. Due to its physical limitations, pioneers in various fields of expertise searched for ways to make the camera and its related processes more efficient and reliable. Over the next three decades, exposure time was reduced to 1/25<sup>th</sup> of a second, and a means to create multiple images from one plate—the *carte-de-visite*—was developed, allowing for a wider circulation of a single image. However, mass publication of photographic images was not feasible until the 1880s with the invention of half-tone printing. The early twentieth century saw a proliferation of mass-published postcards, magazines, books, and illustrated travel magazines that brought the uncharted “dark continent” right into the comforts of urban American and European homes. One no longer had to travel to Africa to visually construct an impression of the African continent and its people.

Though Africans quickly became skilled photographers, learning and mastering the craft brought by Europeans, photography remained a strong visual tool

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<sup>23</sup> Vera Viditz-Ward, “Studio Photography in Freetown,” in *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography* (Paris: Revue Noire, 1998) 34.

of empire-building for Western powers throughout the late nineteenth century and the early half of the twentieth century. The function of photography in the West as photographic arrest records in law enforcement and as classificatory tools in the social and biological sciences shaped what Allan Sekula terms the “honorific” function of photographs in the Western visual imaginary.<sup>24</sup> John Tagg has argued that such a use of photography, rather than its fundamental properties, is what has made photography an instrument of truth and realism. The photograph quickly became a viable means of record keeping and tracking of truthful identities, often in the service of powerful institutions.<sup>25</sup>

In the American West, photographers like Edward Curtis who took images of Native Americans often maintained that their work was to record and preserve the lives and cultures of a “vanishing race.” Recording as a tool of remembrance of the soon-to-be eradicated (either through death or the “civilizing process”) non-white subject was prevalent throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Supported by institutions of higher learning, museums and governments, the power of photographing Native Americans, Africans, and Pacific Islanders, often under the guise of a greater humanistic project, remained a significant means of separating the self and the other. Paul Landau states in *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* that there were two types of Western contact with Africans during the colonial era. The first was an actual physical contact: “trading, working, having sex, sharing a joke or a beer.” The second type of contact was “virtual”: “the paper-thin barrier composed of photographs, words on stationary, and images

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<sup>24</sup> Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989.) 343-89.

<sup>25</sup> John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

projected onto screens.”<sup>26</sup> Although both types of contact required a dialectical interaction between the two players, the “virtual” interaction most often positioned Europeans as *observers* of Africans. Thus, African agency or subjectivity was only ever acknowledged or recognized through Western intervention. Images and texts were in effect the only ways in which those in Europe knew of whom and of what their countrymen were ruling, making this “virtual” interaction more real in a sense than actual physical contact.

Susan Sontag, in her seminal text *On Photography*, makes a distinct correlation between the camera and the gun as tools or weapons of oppression. The act of photographing gives the photographer “possession” of something—of space, of time, of something that is “unreal”—and all this can be done from a “safe” distance. The instrument itself—the camera—can be used as a dehumanizing tool in which the photographer does not have to face or interact with the photographed. “To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be *symbolically possessed* [my emphasis].”<sup>27</sup>

This symbolic possession is what underlies contemporary discourse and criticism of the numerous photographic postcards that circulated in Europe during the colonial era. Malek Alloula’s *The Colonial Harem* presents a powerful analysis of photographic postcards of Algerian women who were exploited by the French during the colonial era. Stereotypical images of “veiled” Algerian women were produced and distributed under the false rubric of photographic “reality.” According to Alloula, whether veiled or not, the illusion of the untouchable female body creates the desire

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Landau, “Empires of the Visual: Photography and Colonial Administration in Africa,” *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, eds. Paul Landau and Deborah Kaspian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 141.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Delta, 1978) 14.

for sexual possession and excessive pleasure.<sup>28</sup> Through the virtual contact of an image on a postcard, viewers could possess the photographed subject-made-object. An exhibition held at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia) in 2004 also revealed the exploitative nature of the Western gaze through postcard images of nude Ethiopian women taken by Italians during the occupation (1936-1941) [Figure 2.1].



Figure 2.1: Postcard of Ethiopian women  
A. Comini, Ethiopia, c. 1936  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

In contrast to images of European women in Africa during the same time frame [Figure 2.2], Ethiopian women were highly sexualized and presented as images and figures for the primary purpose of *consumption*. The three women in Figure 2.1 look directly at the camera, meeting their viewer's gaze. Though the eye contact is intended

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<sup>28</sup> Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, trans. Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).



to provide the illusion that these women are “in control” of their sexuality, or overtly sexual, the inherently imbalanced structure of looking and of being seen through the eyes of the Italian photographer removes the women’s subjectivity and right to self-presentation.

On the other hand, Figure 2.2 provides an exceptionally revealing comparison to the Italian postcards of Ethiopian women. Fully dressed with a hat covering her face from the sun and the probing gaze of inappropriate men, the woman stands on what essentially functions as a pedestal. She is surrounded by men, but the only man who comes near enough to touch her is the white man. The four black African men in the photograph stand around the woman as if to guard her, but only the white man extends his arm out to protect her from the height and danger of her position.

Photographs such as these as well as countless other instances of the exploitation of African subjectivity characterize the types of images that were produced for Western consumption during a period spanning nearly 150 years. In addition to images of overtly sexualized women and ethnographic depictions of life in rural Africa, missionaries photographed their “successful” conversion of “savage heathens” to civilized and “well-dressed” Christians.<sup>29</sup> Governments produced pamphlets of the modernizing and civilizing processes, comparing and contrasting images of the “primitive” African with the educated, civilized African, images that focused primarily on properly dressed bodies.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Margaret Jean Hay, “Changes in Clothing and Struggles Over Identity in Colonial Western Kenya,” *Fashioning Africa: Power and Politics of Dress*, ed. Jean Allman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004) 70.

<sup>30</sup> See David Binkley, “Forward,” *In and Out of Focus: Images from Central Africa, 1885-1960*, Christraud Geary (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2002) 7-9.



Figure 2.2: Italian Couple with Soldiers  
Photographer Unknown, Ethiopia, c. 1936  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

Photographs became personal mementos, ethnographic documents, and postcards that brought “home” and “colony” together for colonial officials and the growing middle-classes in Europe who wanted a taste of the African continent.<sup>31</sup> Nicolas Monti writes in his book *Africa Then: Photographs, 1840-1918* that these distortions of African history and culture “formed the romantic myth in which the European bourgeoisie tried for the last time to manifest two opposing values: freedom and power.”<sup>32</sup> The proliferation of images of Africans in Europe was significant in shaping naïve assumptions and stereotypes about “the dark continent.” Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya describe the exploitation of Africa by European powers as having created an impression of the continent “as an amoral, primitive, and marginal site of dark, brooding forces of misery, and pestilence, a place that both cripples and fervidly arouses the imagination of the traveler, explorer, missionary, bounty hunter, and colonist.”<sup>33</sup>

As photographic technologies improved and the act of taking a picture became less cumbersome, photographic images of the cultural other became ubiquitous throughout Europe and the United States. On one hand, photographs in magazines such as *Life* and in exhibitions like *The Family of Man* (Museum of Modern Art, 1955) presented a romantic view of the universal element of “humanity” through images—African mothers nursing their children, men working in the fields and building roads, children playing and laughing—an attempt that only served to further support the idea that the cultural other was a child in the great family of man,

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<sup>31</sup> For a detailed discussion of the production, functions, and readings of photography in Africa during the colonial era, see: Christraud Geary, “Missionary Photography: Private and Public Readings,” *African Arts*, 24:4 (October 1991) 48-59.

<sup>32</sup> Nicolas Monti, *Africa Then: Photographs, 1840-1918* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987) 4.

<sup>33</sup> Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya, “Colonial Imagery, Tropes of Disruption: History, Culture, and Representation in the Works of African Photographers,” *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1996) 18.

protected and nurtured by the patriarchal powers of the West.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, there were publications such as *National Geographic*, which sought to preserve a timeless Africa, unaffected by the dynamics of change in modern, urban life. Neither of these visions told the true story of Africa at the time—issues of oppression under colonialism, growing independence movements, and the rapidly changing social and political environments. Because of these glaring inaccuracies, questions of subjectivity, power dynamics, representation and agency remain at the foreground in the discourse surrounding photographs from the African continent.<sup>35</sup>

Due in part to the contested nature of photographs of Africans by Westerners, images that remove the Western element from the photographic process have become a rich source of critical analyses on *self*-representation in Africa. As previously mentioned, Africans began learning the craft and marketing their trade soon after the introduction of photography to the continent. In the 1860s, African-established photography studios were operating in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and by the early 1900s, African owned and operated studios existed throughout the continent.<sup>36</sup> Like their European counterparts, early African photographers created images for the tourist trade (mainly postcards) in addition to operating portrait studios. Trained by Europeans and often working under colonial systems of power, culture, and customs, early African photographers produced images that echoed the aesthetic standards of European photography—the painted backdrop, classical architecture and Victorian accents that were frequently found in European portraits [Figure 2.3]. Additionally,

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<sup>34</sup> For more on *The Family of Man* exhibition, see: Allan Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs,” *Art Journal*, 41:1 (Spring 1981), 15-25 and Roland Barthes, “The Great Family of Man,” *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 100-2.

<sup>35</sup> For more on this topic, see Elizabeth Edwards, *Anthropology and Photography, 1860-1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); and Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya, “Colonial Imaginary, Tropes of Disruption: History, Culture and Representation in the Works of African Photographers,” *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present*, eds. Okwui Enwezor, Olu Oguibe and Octavio Zaya (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996).

<sup>36</sup> Viditz-Ward, “Studio Photography,” 36.

the clientele at these studios were typically limited to Europeans and Africans who had some sort of relationship with the colonial government, typically through administration or education.

Another common type of photographic portraiture from Africa were those that depicted contrast, not only between the “primitive” African and the properly “civilized” African, but also between African and their white, colonial counterparts. For example, in Figure 2.4, the Akan king *Asantehene* Prempeh II poses with an unidentified colonial official. Standing side-by-side, both men are dressed in full court regalia. The liveliness of Prempeh II’s elaborate *kente* cloth, gold jewelry and fly whisk is in stark contrast to the lean, crisp lines of the colonial official’s uniform. The re-presentation of black bodies in African photography thus remained a tool of European imperialism well into the twentieth century. Even images of “powerful” men and women were often subject to conditions that perpetuated the objectification of Africans in portraiture.

It is an impossible task to characterize a singular “African” mode of photography, primarily because its development throughout the continent was not uniform. The role of studio photographers was significantly different in West African countries like Mali than East African countries such as Ethiopia. Although photography was initially introduced in similar ways—by European explorers, missionaries and colonial officials—the varied relationships between the established social and political system in Africa and the Europeans who brought photography to the continent invariably shaped the ways in which photography was received and developed.





Figure 2.3: Group Portrait  
Photographer Unknown, Côte d'Ivoire, c. 1900-1920  
ARTstor, The Image Gallery, The Metropolitan Museum of Art





Figure 2.4: *Asantehene* Prempeh II and Unidentified Colonial Official  
Photographer Unknown, Ghana, c. 1930

As a general trend, a major shift in African photography took place in the mid-twentieth century during the time when many African countries gained independence from colonial rule. Some of the best known and most thoroughly investigated of these photographs are the works of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé of Mali. Numerous international exhibitions and scholarly inquiries into their photographs have produced a great deal of dialogue about West African portrait photography. Though the “success” of their photographs has been fundamental to expanding beyond the constraints of understanding photography in Africa as a colonial enterprise, the actual move towards deconstructing the image has been a rather limited one. Firmly situated within the context of the euphoria of independence from colonialism, Keïta’s and Sidibé’s images tend to be discussed solely in terms of the social and political conditions of the times although a large part of their appeal lies in the fact that they depict a uniquely Malian fashion sensibility, both in photographic style and in the clothing the subjects wore. Additionally, the value of their photographs as *portraits* is often overlooked. Unlike action photography, portraits, particularly those that are created within the studio setting, provide people with “an opportunity to negotiate between how society defines them and how they wish to be defined.”<sup>37</sup> An essential aspect of visually defining and representing the self is the process of adorning or dressing the body. Thus, clothing and the idea of self-fashioning are central to deconstructing the portrait photograph.

In the introduction to a chapter on portrait photography, Graham Clarke states that, “the portrait in photography is one of the most problematic areas of photographic practice...At virtually every level, and within every context, the portrait photograph is

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<sup>37</sup> Michelle Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That: The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé* [Exhibition Catalogue] (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 28.



fraught with ambiguity.”<sup>38</sup> Clarke’s discussion of portrait photography is based within a Western history of image-making, and if the understanding of photographic portraiture in the West is “fraught with ambiguity,” then the history of portraiture is even more complicated in Africa.

Portraiture is commonly defined as a work of art that represents *a unique individual* and portrays likeness in a person’s physical features, but can also represent social position or inner characteristics. According to the “standards” of portraiture in art historical discourse, a common conception about portraits is that it is a largely Western phenomenon, and the justification lies in the notion that portraiture “tends to flourish in cultures that privilege the notion of the individual over that of the collective.”<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the idea that portraiture only truly developed in the West is supported by the fact that some religions such as traditional Judaism and Islam prohibit creating images of human likeness. However, in non-Muslim Africa, the representation of the human body is often a central aspect of visual culture. Yet, due to various Eurocentric constraints on what constitutes “art” in general and portraiture in particular, issues such as the anonymity of the subject (as well as the photographer/artist) and the media used to create works, African masks and sculptures are rarely considered “portraits.”

In an insightful look at the characteristics of traditional portraiture in Africa, Jean Borgatti and Richard Brilliant explore the specifically African attributes to the visual language of human likeness as well as considering Western concepts of portraiture within an African context. Borgatti’s work recontextualizes the “anonymous” African mask/sculpture and provides a basis for understanding the representation of specific individuals in these “functional” objects. Although

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<sup>38</sup> Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 101.

<sup>39</sup> Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 17.

recognition of portraiture in Africa stems from the same interaction of situations and events that has expanded the range of African images since the late 1800s (namely, African contact with the West), the basic concepts of remembrance, commemoration, and signification of social, economic and/or political power existed in traditional African imagery before the introduction of Western modes of visual representation.<sup>40</sup>

Shearer West defines portraits as “a work of art that represents a unique individual,”<sup>41</sup> but obviously, this is not the only criterion. Portraiture in the West is deeply embedded in the practice of artist patronage and was historically limited to highly wealthy individuals. Although the invention of photography democratized the practice, portraits produced by photographers continued to adhere to a rather rigid hierarchy, which maintained that the creation of one’s likeness was a symbol of status. Even today, the masses of portrait photographers are hardly considered to be of the same caliber as photographers like Nadar, Cecil Beaton, Horst P. Horst, and Edward Steichen. To have a photograph taken by a renowned photographer is likewise a symbol of status and prestige.

Traditional portraiture in Africa worked in many of the same way. Portraits were symbols of wealth and social importance, and those in positions of power were likely to be represented in various visual forms. For example, bronze cast sculptures from the ancient city of Benin represented kings and other officials in the royal court [Figure 2.5]. The long, involved process of producing these bronze sculptures makes it unlikely that they were available to those outside of the royal court. Dated between the twelfth and fifteen centuries A.D., scholars have debated whether or not the Benin bronzes depicted specific individuals and functioned as portraits. However, a great deal of care was put into accurately depicting various identifying features such as the

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<sup>40</sup> Jean Borgatti, *Likeness and Beyond: Portraits from Africa and the World* (New York: Center for African Art, Museum for African Art, 1990).

<sup>41</sup> West, *Portraiture*, 21.

keloids above each eye, signifying whether the person depicted was an Edo male, a non-Edo male, or an Edo woman. Additionally, these bronze sculptures were thought to represent particular rulers, or *obas*, regardless of the resemblance in physical attributes.<sup>42</sup>

Borgatti divides the genre of portraiture in Africa into three categories—general anthropomorphic portraits, representational portraits, and emblematic portraits. Representational portraits correspond most closely to portraiture in the West; however, many anthropomorphic portraits also have connections to specific people. For example, the *ibeji* statues of the Yoruba are conventionalized human figures used to portray a deceased twin. These memorial figures represent specific individuals, though traditionally, they may not have bore any visual resemblance to the deceased. The referential quality of these figures has been confirmed by the integration of photographic portraits into twin rituals.<sup>43</sup> Photographs of surviving twins have been used now for several decades to serve the same purpose as the *ibeji* figure, even if the surviving twin is of a different sex from the deceased. The *likeness* of appearance gradually became more important, but the fact that the image *does not* reflect reality affects the function of photography (as bearers of “truth”) and representation among the Yoruba. The same characteristics attributed to the carved, wooden *ibeji* figure have been transferred to a more “convenient” format.

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<sup>42</sup> Borgatti, *Likeness and Beyond*, 60. See also Bryna Freyer, *Royal Benin Art: In the Collection of the National Museum of African Art* (Washington, D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 16-20.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen Sprague, “Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See Themselves,” *Photography’s Other Histories*, eds. Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003).



Figure 2.5: Commemorative Trophy Head  
Kingdom on Benin (current-day Nigeria), Late 15th – Early 16th Century  
Courtesy of National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

However, what complicates the “meaning” of the photograph as the portrait of a deceased twin is the fact that although it can bear a resemblance to the actual person it represents, its true signification is for a spirit. Borgatti notes that the most controversial aspect of portraiture revolves around the degree to which a specific person can be conveyed through the actual *physical* likeness of a portrait.<sup>44</sup> More important in regards to African representation, however, is the concept of reality.<sup>45</sup> In many instances, the process of placing a name onto an object justifies the representational relationship between the two. In addition, representations are often considered to be more powerful (in spirit) than the people they represent, as is the case of portraits of the deceased placed in shrines of the deity of iron and war, Ogun.<sup>46</sup>

In “Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See Themselves,” Stephen Sprague discusses the ways in which the characteristics of Yoruba photography are a reflection of Yoruba cultural values and perceptions of the world. For example various formal aspects of portraiture, such as background and pose, function according to Yoruba ideals of authority and prestige in portraits of chiefs and elders. Among the Yoruba, the criteria for a “good” photographer involve the photographer’s ability to visualize and capture whatever the client requests.<sup>47</sup> The process of negotiation between the photographer and the client results in an image where the subjectivity of the photographed person is clearly presented. This assertion of “subjectivity” is the very reason why African photographers from the 1950s and 1960s are acclaimed today—Keïta and Sidibé not only refashioned portraiture through relying on aspects of

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<sup>44</sup> Jean Borgatti, *Levels of Reality: Portraiture in African Art*, African Studies Center Working Papers, No. 36 (Boston: African Studies Center, Boston University, 1980) 10.

<sup>45</sup> Margaret Thompson Drewal “Portraiture and the Construction of Reality in Yorubaland and Beyond,” *African Arts*, 23:3 (1990) 43.

<sup>46</sup> Drewal, “Portraiture and Reality,” 46.

<sup>47</sup> Sprague, “Yoruba Photography,” 243.

African visual culture, but they also captured their sitters' "personhood" through a dialectical relationship between photographer and subject.

Although the idea of likeness became increasingly important (as well as possible) through photography, in the numerous portraits created by Keïta and Sidibé, the importance of an idealized human representation is apparent. The title of Lamunière's book on Keïta and Sidibé, *You Look Beautiful Like That*, captures the essence of their portraits. The Bambara expression *i ka nyè tan* (you look beautiful like that) is an important aspect of self-presentation in Mali, and according to various interviews with Keïta and Sidibé, their primary goal as portraitists was to present their subjects in the most flattering manner possible.<sup>48</sup> Their clients often came dressed in their best clothes, sporting new hairstyles and asking to be photographed with specific props. The photographer's job was to understand what the client wanted the photograph to project and to visually construct that image. Thus, the images were often highly stylized and adhered closely to the fashion of the times.

Some portraits by Keïta and Sidibé clearly deny Western tropes of portraiture. Sidibé's *Boxers Giving a Demonstration* (1965) depicts four young men in boxing shorts and gloves [Figure 2.6], clearly posing in front of Sidibé's studio backdrop, but they appear to be "frozen in action." One man lies on the ground as if he has just been knocked out. However, rather than an action shot, which captures one moment in an continuous line of action, the men in this photograph are clearly posing. Three of them look out towards the camera as they hold their arms up in a fighting stance. The other is in perfect profile. Neither portrait nor action shot, this image captures much more than a boxing demonstration. The young men in this image had a specific idea of what they wanted to convey in their photograph—their boxing skills and their "toughness" as fighters. However, the absurdity of the "action" juxtaposed with their frozen stances

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<sup>48</sup> Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful*, 13-4.



creates a light-hearted atmosphere that clearly characterizes the essence of youth culture in Bamako, Mali during the 1960s. Another series of portraits created by Sidibé are of various groups of people in a standard setting and pose for photographic portraits. The only difference being that the subjects are sitting or standing with their backs to the camera.

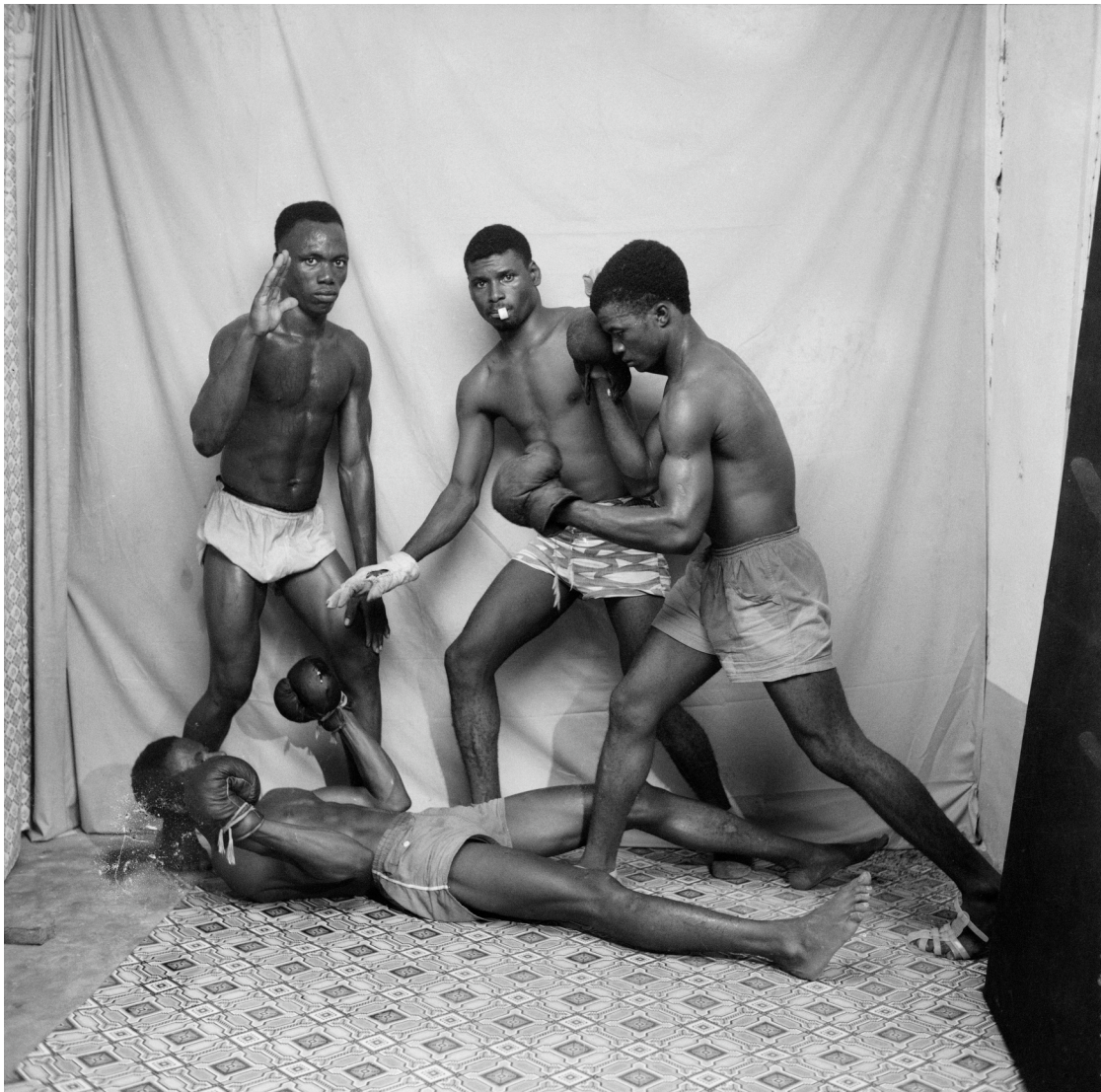


Figure 2.6: *Boxeurs en demonstration (Boxers Posing)*  
Malick Sidibé ©, Mali, 1965  
Courtesy C.A.A.C. – The Pigozzi Collection, Geneva

In Ethiopia, traditional styles of representing the human form played a significant role in how photographic portraits functioned and developed throughout the twentieth century. Ethiopia's longstanding tradition of paintings on parchment principally remained in the religious realm throughout its history. Because the royal dynasties were considered to be a part of the religious realm, emperors and empresses as well as priests were also depicted in these paintings typically reserved for biblical figures and visual narratives of stories found in the *Kebre Nagast*. Most of the visual traditions remained largely within the Church, and monks were trained in various crafts—making wooden or brass crosses, producing parchment out of goatskin, painting, etc. When photography was introduced to Ethiopia, it was a democratizing practice that brought the availability of “preserving” one’s likeness a reality to a significantly larger group of people. However, for the first half of the twentieth century, photography remained, for the most part, in the hands of the aristocracy. Although private photography studios were cropping up throughout the country’s urban centers, the government maintained control over the means by which images were available to the public, primarily in newspapers and magazines.

Official state portraits of Emperor Haile Selassie and his family were widely distributed in print media throughout the mid-twentieth century. By this time, portrait photographs of the royal family had adopted many of the stylistic traits of portraiture associated with European royalty, but early portraits of Emperor Menelik II<sup>49</sup> and other important figures incorporated many representational styles from traditional Ethiopian religious painting. Traditional painting typically portrayed the human figure in “full face” with both eyes visible, looking forward, and with little concern for perspective or realism [Figure 2.7]. Religious painting, which remained relatively consistent in style for centuries (as opposed to or in comparison with religious painting

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<sup>49</sup> Alternate spellings: Menilek, Menyelek



in Europe during the same time period), generally depicted benevolent figures in full face while the evil were depicted in profile.<sup>50</sup> In the goatskin painting in Figure 2.7, most of the figures' faces are depicted frontally, regardless of how their bodies are situated in the image. There are a few instances in which the face is depicted in profile, but the most common depiction of the human face in traditional Ethiopian painting direct and fully frontal.

Distinct, however, from other visual representations of the human body in Africa, Ethiopian paintings tended to lean more toward the figurative rather than the anthropomorphic or emblematic. Although these traditional/religious depictions of the human body were not necessarily portraits or representations of a particular person's physical likeness, early photographic portraits from nineteenth century Ethiopia reflect the full face painting aesthetic, despite the fact that the photographs were likely taken by European photographers. Figure 2.8 depicts *Ras Mengesha Yohannes* in a style that was very typical of photographic portraits from the turn of the century. Subjects were typically photographed frontally within a shallow picture space, a compositional characteristic that was also found in early commercial portrait photography from West Africa.<sup>51</sup> Most photographic portraits from this time lacked any sort of background embellishments and were almost exclusively of subjects from the waist up. Like the portrait of *Ras Mengesha Yohannes*, Ethiopian subjects were positioned directly in front of the camera, dressed in traditional robes, which indicated a person's status and rank within the aristocracy.

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<sup>50</sup> Richard Pankhurst, "Ethiopian Christian Art: Its Origins and Evolution," *An Anthology of African Art: The Twentieth Century*, eds. N'Goné Fall and Jean Loup Pivin (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2002), 73-75.

<sup>51</sup> Sprague, "Yoruba Photography," 244-5.



Figure 2.7: Legend of Queen of Sheba and King Solomon on Goatskin  
 19<sup>th</sup> Century  
 Gift of Maurice W. Perreault  
 Photograph courtesy of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University





Figure 2.8: *Ras Mengesha Yohannes*  
Photographer Unknown, Ethiopia, c. 1900  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

Gradually, as international influences entered Ethiopia and formal portrait studios began to appear in urban centers, the photographic style reflected aspects of both European and Orientalist modes of representation. However, at the same time, Ethiopian portraits developed a unique aesthetic that corresponded with the particular social and cultural conditions of the times, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

The photographic studio space itself presents unique conditions for the creation of self-representations. It is often analogously compared to a theater: a stage where the sitters play the role of actors performing for the camera, and the photographer is the director, assisting with the creation of the desired image through adjustments of the props, lighting and background.<sup>52</sup> The role of the sitter in the production of photographic images has been particularly important in the discourse on African portraiture, particularly because the issue of the imbalance of power is crucial to the uses of photography under colonialism. In “The Photographic Experience: Toward an Understanding of Photography in Africa,” Olu Oguibe recalls his own “photographic encounter” as a child:

...we would spend long sessions preparing for a sitting, not counting several days of anxiety and anticipation. My father would rather have the photographer over than sit in a studio setting, for each element in the photograph had an intractable symbolism for him, so he always wanted to have a hand in the choice of props and background. On arrival of the proprietor of Ebenezer Photos...[the photographer] would take control like a director his theatrical cast.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> For more on issues of authorship in African portraiture, see: Elizabeth Bigham, “Issues of Authorship in the Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keita,” *African Arts*, 32:1 (Spring 1999), 56-67, 94-6.

<sup>53</sup> Olu Oguibe, “The Photographic Experience: Toward an Understanding of Photography in Africa,” *Flash Afrique!* (Vienna: Kunstthalle Wien, 2001), 9-10.

Oguibe likens the production of being photographed to a theatrical performance, but he confirms the role his father played in the construction of the image. Substantiating a dialectical relationship between the sitter and the photographer establishes the sitter's subjectivity and authority over his/her own representation.

However, essentially, portraits were and continue to be about fashion, both in terms of how the subject chooses to dress and present him/herself and how the photographer decides to frame and develop the final image. Just as certain styles of clothing have passed in and out of the realm of the "fashionable," photographic styles have done the same; the real question of photographic portraiture is basically: "What looks good now?" because the portrait photograph is about being *seen*, both by the self and by the other. In this case, photographs of royalty or celebrities are an excellent point of departure, particularly because fashion is to a certain extent linked to wealth and status. Thorstein Veblen, and to a lesser extent Georg Simmel (both of whom I discuss in greater detail in the following chapter), have supported the trickle-down theory of the fashion process that contends that fashion is initiated at the top of the social structure and eventually makes its way down to the bottom:

...fashions differ for different classes—the fashions of the upper stratum of society are never identical with those of the lower; in fact, they are abandoned by the former as soon as the latter prepares to appropriate them...The various psychological elements in fashion all conform to this fundamental principle.<sup>54</sup>

The trickle-down theory (which was not a term expressly used by either Veblen or Simmel) places emphasis on the class differentiation function of fashion, and has been found to be problematic because of its reductionist approach to the fashion system,

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<sup>54</sup> Georg Simmel, "Fashion," Reprinted in *The American Journal of Sociology*, 62:6 (1904, May 1957) 543-4.

minimizing it into a hierarchical order of consumers.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps not to the extent that Simmel suggests, but certainly to some degree, what is “fashionable” among a particular group of people—typically people who carry a great deal of social or cultural capital—eventually becomes desirable to a wider audience. For example, *carte-de-visité* depicting people like Queen Victoria and Napoleon were extremely popular during the mid-nineteenth century, and they functioned as fashionable images. Their clothing, hairstyles and even their poses were widely imitated by the general public. What the *carte-de-visité* created was the public’s ability to *see* people who could not be otherwise encountered. Photographs, and portraits in particular, constructed and represented the identities of their subjects as a *visual* entity. In this way, photography deconstructed and reshaped the entire process of representation, thus becoming a crucial element of modern vision and the “techniques of the observer.”

### *The Photograph and Modern Vision*

The invention of the photograph in 1839 led to a radical reconfiguring of the visual processes that have become increasingly important in numerous disciplines including art history, psychoanalysis, philosophy and critical theory. Vision, or the act of seeing, has historically held an extraordinarily high status in Western philosophy, culture and religion. Social groups in nearly all societies have used the visual as “the more-often-than not unconscious medium of choice for the representation of a cultural ideological spectacle, creating a sense both of inclusion within a community of

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<sup>55</sup> For further discussion, see Herbert Blumer, “Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection” *Sociological Quarterly*, 10 (Summer 1969) 275-91.



adherents and of exclusion from the company of Others.”<sup>56</sup> A number of other scholars including Heidegger, Derrida and Lacan have argued that vision is powerfully privileged in modernity,<sup>57</sup> and it is becoming increasingly more apparent as universities around the world are creating departments of “Visual Studies” to focus specifically on the importance of what is *seen*.

Recent scholarship, including the works of Kaja Silverman, Jacques Lacan, and also Victor Burgin in his essay “Re-Reading *Camera Lucida*,”<sup>58</sup> have theorized what constitutes and circumscribes our look, how the image of what is seen comes to be inscribed in our memory, how we act upon it, how it acts upon us, and how it serves to normalize a certain visual culture. Social and psychic processes produce visual memories, and those processes themselves turn selected elements of our individual identity into naturalized social commonalities, into shared visual cultures.<sup>59</sup>

The question of a modern vision provides emphasis to the fact that concepts of seeing must be viewed as historically specific, linked to specific discourses and forms of social power, and consequently a particular way of organizing the relations between observer and observed, the visible and the invisible.<sup>60</sup> The invention of photography is a crucial moment in the development of a modern structure of vision. In legitimizing specific forms of subject-object relations, technologies of vision such as photography

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<sup>56</sup> Peter Stupples, “Visual Culture, Synthetic Memory and the Construction of National Identity,” *Third Text*, 17:2 (2003) 129.

<sup>57</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), Jacques Derrida, “Sending: On Representation,” *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy*, eds. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan Schrift (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990) 107-138, Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton and Company, 1978).

<sup>58</sup> See also Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1986).

<sup>59</sup> Stupples, “Visual Culture,” 134.

<sup>60</sup> Jonathon Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991) 6-8.

organize specific relations between knowledge, power and the body.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, a modern conceptualization of vision *cannot* be universally applied. The very act of seeing is constructed and manipulated by various social powers. With photography, the process of viewing an image is constructed through a number of different layers: the aesthetic construction of the scene in front of the camera (the subject's clothing, pose, body language, etc., and the photographer's influence on these elements), the visual construction of viewing the image, and the construction of the language used to "read" the photograph.

"Reading" a photograph, or learning the language of photographic imagery is a culturally constructed practice as complex as vision itself. During photography's early years, photographers as well as the people who saw their images were unsure of how the realistic nature of photographs corresponded with their established vocabulary of visual representation. A powerful example of the extent to which photographic images were misunderstood is characterized by the public reception of Henry Peach Robinson's photograph *Fading Away* (1858). Depicting a scene from a fictive narrative of a young girl dying of tuberculosis, audiences at the time were unable (or unprepared perhaps) to distinguish between reality and fiction. His photograph, though highly praised and well received by many art critics, was also condemned for being morbid and perverse for depicting a "realistic" scene of death [Figure 2.9]. Prior to photography, painted or drawn images were representational, not realistic, so for several decades following its invention, photographs were produced following a painterly aesthetic, a form of visual representation that could be understood *as a representation* (though Robinson was criticized despite the traditional, "painterly" conventions of his composite photograph). Photographs, on the other hand, provided

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<sup>61</sup> Suren Lalvani, *Photography, Vision and the Production of Modern Bodies* (New York: Albany State University of New York Press, 1996) 2.



“messages without a code,” without a way in which to read or understand the image.<sup>62</sup> In “The Ambiguity of the Photograph,” John Berger writes that “photography unlike drawing, does not possess a language,” thus, photographs “supply information without having a language of their own.”<sup>63</sup>

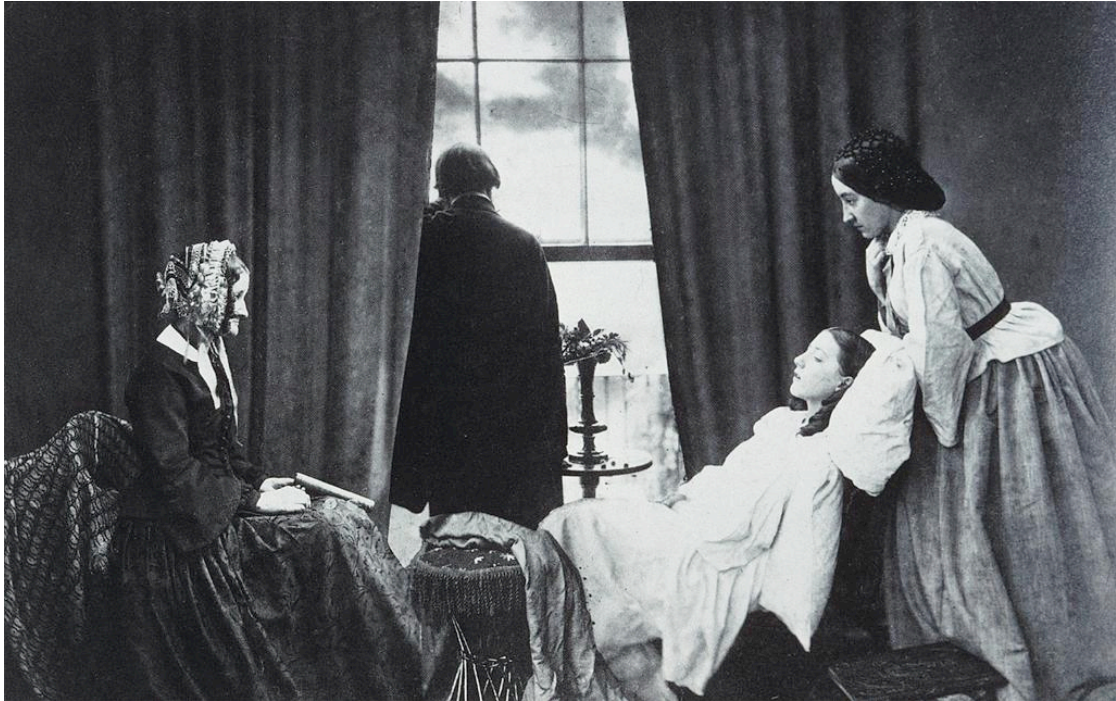


Figure 2.9: *Fading Away*  
Henry Peach Robinson, 1858  
ARTstor, The Image Gallery, University of California, San Diego

Though Berger also argues that the photograph is inherently ambiguous because of its disassociation with space and time, a system of reading or recognizing the visual forms within photographs has obviously emerged. A photograph is recognized as a realistic representation of an event that has occurred. Its function (or language) as evidence has been established (though with digital technologies, the role

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<sup>62</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977) 45.

<sup>63</sup> John Berger, “The Ambiguity of the Photograph,” *The Anthropology of Media: A Reader*, eds. Kelly Askew and Richard R. Wilks (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002) 53.

of truth in photographs is being questioned) to the extent that modern vision is often described in terms of the structure of the photographic lens, and human existence is not only supported by the image, but is also described as being derived from the act of being looked upon. Barthes asserts in *Camera Lucida* that “the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.”<sup>64</sup> To be photographed, capturing and eternally reproducing an instance that lasts only for a moment, is to make one’s self into a subject to be looked at, a thing that becomes subjected to and substantiated by the spectator’s gaze—a look invested with power. Yet, Barthes also claims to “derive [his] existence from the photographer”<sup>65</sup> because the photograph is *proof* of existence, of having been at a particular time and place. The photograph, at once, constructs and deconstructs the self.

Expanding upon Lacanian theory on vision and the gaze, Barthes claims that the photograph, the image of something, cannot be distinguished from its referent: “It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself.”<sup>66</sup> In keeping with this understanding of the photograph and accepting that the image always carries the referent, then Kaja Silverman’s reading of the Lacanian model of looking also becomes significant. The gaze of the onlooker is mediated by a screen, what Silverman maintains as the social constructs of sexuality, gender, class, race, etc.<sup>67</sup> In other words, what the viewer sees is not actually the reality (or the Real) in front of him/her. What is seen is an interpretation of that reality. Laura Mulvey elaborates on Lacan’s interpretation of the screen in her seminal text “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” by pointing out and elaborating on the homogenous construction of the

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<sup>64</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang. 1981. 12.

<sup>65</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 11.

<sup>66</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 5.

<sup>67</sup> See Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

gaze.<sup>68</sup> Mulvey's concern is primarily with the gendered construction of vision, but it draws many other issues of marginalization into discussion. Recognizing that the way vision is constructed in Western society (both in academic discourse and in popular culture) is highly subjective provides the rupture necessary to explore alternate spaces of vision.

However, regardless of what the photograph itself contains or how the view is mediated by various factors, the photograph always exists in relation to the spectator. The viewer does the looking and the image itself is projected outwards and derives its meaning only *when it is being looked at*. A photograph that is never seen does nothing to either preserve the moment (for whom is the image preserved?) or to project its existence (to whom is the image projected?). The person doing the seeing gives the photograph its significance, and simultaneously, is acted upon by the image.

In recent years, the path toward understanding the construction of *African* vision through photography has been paved by scholars like Okwui Enwezor, Kobena Mercer and Olu Oguibe through a combination of exploratory exhibitions and new perspectives on issues of subjectivity. Exhibitions such as *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* (1996) and critical texts like the collection of essays in Landau and Kaspin's *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa* (2002) and Christopher Pinney's *Photography's Other Histories* are central to reinterpreting various aspects of photography in the non-West as instruments of power, rather than one in which the subject of the photograph is rendered an object, without agency, without control.

The actual politics of vision in Africa, however, is an extremely complex field of inquiry. Through analyses of African aesthetics and the politics of representation, scholars of African art and culture have attempted to deconstruct and interpret various

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<sup>68</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16:3 (Autumn 1975) 6-18.

aspects of inquiry related to vision such as social variations of ideals of beauty and representations of status and wealth. In spite of this, what makes this task particularly daunting and difficult in the African context is the fact that the conception of “ideals” varies to extremes throughout the continent, even from one neighboring ethnic group to another. Additionally, the realities and experiences of the colonial condition that succeeded in altering, and in many cases destroying, innumerable traditions and belief systems resulted in a range of outcomes that are in and of themselves a challenge to define.

What can be asserted with relative certainty is that like the West, photography was instrumental in altering the visual process in Africa. Unlike Europe and the U.S., however, the development of the technology was not an organic process. Jonathon Crary, Victor Burgin, John Tagg, Geoffrey Batchen, John Berger, and Allan Sekula have all stated that the invention of the photograph coincided with the “progress” of other methods of visual representation. In other words, Europe was ready in many ways for this massive restructuring of the visual field. The impression of the photograph’s emergence in Europe is thus one of a natural progression. Despite public renunciations of the mechanical process of reproducing human likeness<sup>69</sup> and of photographs like Henry Peach Robinson’s *Fading Away*, the fact that this new technology of representation and vision was well received is emphasized more than its negative responses. On the other hand, in Africa and other non-Western regions, photography is understood as having been a complete rupture from traditional modes

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<sup>69</sup> The *Leipzig City Advertiser* condemned the photographic process as irreverent and offensive: To try to catch transient reflected images is not merely something that it is impossible but, as a thorough German investigation has shown, the very desire to do so is blasphemy. Man is created in the image of God and God’s image cannot be captured by any human machine. Only the divine artist, divinely inspired, may be allowed, in a moment of solemnity, at the higher call of his genius, to dare to reproduce the divine-human features, but never by means of mechanical aid.

Quoted in Walter Benjamin, “A Small History of Photography,” *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books, 1979), 241.

of representation. The emphasis is placed on the fact that the realism in photographic images was far too “foreign” a concept for people whose modes of representation focused on the metaphorical or symbolic rather than the realistic.

However, the evidence suggests otherwise. Photography flourished throughout Africa, and as a means of self-representation, the portrait studio and the photographic image became vitally important to the assertion of subjectivity on a wide, public scale. Although numerous anecdotes by European explorers and missionaries exist of how Africans simply could not comprehend the technology, photography quickly became a means of reproducing one’s likeness and was understood as such in urban centers. The question of photography offering a foreign or unfamiliar mode of representation is of little significance once the photographic image situates itself within the visual imaginary.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Theoretical and Methodological Framework: Fashion

*Dress is a very foolish thing, and yet it is a very foolish thing for a man not to be well dressed, according to his rank and way of life; and it is so far from being a disparagement to any man's understand, that it is rather a proof of it, to be as well dressed as those whom he loves with: the difference in this case, between a man of sense and a fop, is, that the fop values himself upon his dress; and the man of sense laughs at it, at the same time that he knows that he must not neglect it.*<sup>70</sup>

Lord Chesterfield to his son, 19 November 1745

In this chapter, I address theories about and related to fashion as they pertain to modernity. Because the current surge of discourse on fashion comes from diverse fields of inquiry, discussions about clothing seem quite disjointed and unrelated at times. However, the arguments presented in this chapter is organized in a way that brings to light the various and distinct aspects of fashion theory that are relevant to this project without losing sight of what clothing and the body accomplish as a singular phenomenon.

The first section examines the development of fashion history as a discipline that is entirely Eurocentric. However, it also considers contemporary fashion theory in relation to psychoanalysis, a union that invariably problematizes the relationship between the self and the other, thus the West and the non-West. The following section addresses the relationship between clothing and the body, looking at the act of dressing as an embodied practice. It also situates the dressed body in the social world where the body and the clothing on it derive meaning. The final part of the discussion

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<sup>70</sup> Cited in Quentin Bell, *On Human Finery*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 18.

on fashion situates fashion within the framework of modernity, examining the role of the body and clothing within the modern metropolis.

The goal of this discussion is not to chronicle the history of fashion in the West or to situate Ethiopian fashion within a Western discourse of fashion. Rather, it is to address various aspects of academic inquiry into fashion and the body that are not typically considered in the context of non-Western fashion practices. More often than not, African clothing and adornment are discussed as a system *separate* from its Western counterpart. Though, as this paper seeks to demonstrate, fashion within the urban Ethiopian context is inevitably different because of the unique role of the monarchy, it is necessary to consider the development of the Ethiopian fashion system in relation to its Western counterpart. Much of what emerged in Ethiopia was a direct result of the Ethiopian encounter with the Other; thus, a consideration of the discourse surrounding the Western fashion system is important to understanding how clothing shaped the development of modernity in Ethiopia.

#### *A (Western) History of Fashion*

In the field of fashion or costume history, there remains a large and distinct gap between Western and non-Western modes of dressing. Though fashion historians such as Elizabeth Wilson, Diana Crane, and Fred Davis have been criticized for their lack of concern for the fashion system as it exists outside of Europe and North America, at the same time, they have been praised for their critical examinations of a system that is central to Western industrialism and the commodity-centered, *modern* culture that emerged as a result. Wilson's *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* is often considered to be the seminal text on the field of fashion history, a text that directly

attributes the rise of the modern fashion system to the growth of the bourgeoisie in urban centers, new forms of mass communication, and the circulation of images.<sup>71</sup>

However, Wilson asserts that economic conditions and the rise of capitalism, though central and also the most popular explanation of the fashion phenomenon, were not the only factors that influenced the birth of the fashion system.<sup>72</sup> The concept of “being on display in public” as opposed to the privacy of the home influenced a new mode of dressing, one that centered on the idea of being seen. The public persona increasingly relied on the dressed body to convey confirmations as well as aspirations of social and economic status. As the importance of dress in the public sphere grew during the nineteenth century, fashion houses that created luxury items for elite clients established themselves as the arbiters of “high fashion,” something that few people could afford, but the masses could attempt to emulate.

In *Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen argues that fashion is one aspect of the conspicuous leisure, conspicuous wealth and conspicuous waste he holds to be characteristic of a materialistic society in which the ownership of wealth does more to confer prestige on its owner than either family lineage or individual talent.<sup>73</sup> As such, he asserts that conspicuous waste accounts for changes in fashion, essentially drawing parallels between fashion and frivolity. Though Veblen’s work was written and published in 1899, his assertions have persisted in discussions of fashion history, and on a more general level in discussions of popular or mass culture. Like Veblen, Jean Baudrillard denounces fashion as a destructive form of consumerism because it:

embodies a compromise between the need to innovate and the other need to change nothing in the fundamental order. It is this that characterizes “modern” societies. Thus it results in a game of

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<sup>71</sup> Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 26-7, 30.

<sup>72</sup> Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 49.

<sup>73</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899, London: Allen and Unwin, 1957), 179-182.



change...old and new are not relative to contradictory needs: they are the “cyclical” paradigm of fashion.<sup>74</sup>

According to Baudrillard’s view of fashion, pleasure within a consumer society is uncontrollable as well as dangerously intoxicating. Additionally, his characterization of fashion problematizes numerous forms of popular culture—music, literature, films, television entertainment, etc. The notion that much of the “culture” that emerged from within the modern, capitalist condition is meaningless and without substance is not a new or unfamiliar one.<sup>75</sup>

Georg Simmel, a German sociologist of the later nineteenth century, drew out the relationship between urban life, individualism and the rapid development of fashion in the industrial era. According to Simmel, an increased sense of individual personality and ego developed as men and women began to move in wider social circles. The constant encounters between the self and a stream of sensations and with other personalities created a more intense awareness of one’s own subjectivity than the old routine rhythm of rural life. In urban centers, the individual constantly interacts with others who are strangers and learns to survive through a continual manipulation of the self.<sup>76</sup> Fashion is one aspect of this self-presentation and manipulation.

Simmel hints at the connections between fashion as a means of orienting the self in an increasingly chaotic world and what Jacques Lacan, several decades later, formulates into a psychoanalytic theory of the decentered, fragmented self. In Western fashion history, psychoanalytic theory has become central to understanding the significance of clothing in establishing, reaffirming, and extending the identity of its

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<sup>74</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1981), 51.

<sup>75</sup> See Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>76</sup> Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, Donald Levine, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 311.

wearer.<sup>77</sup> Because cloth layers the body, functioning as both a boundary that holds in the self and keeps out the other, dressing the body is a fully embodied practice, and consequently, a fundamental aspect of subjectivity.

The relationship between fashion theory and psychoanalytic theory is one of the major challenges to understanding the fashion system of non-Western cultures with the same depth of inquiry. Existing scholarship on the politics of identity formation in non-Western cultures is quite limited, and as some would argue, it is in many ways an impossible task to undertake because the very foundation of psychoanalytic theory is built upon the notion that the cultural Other is what distinguishes the self from the world around it. As mentioned in the introduction, Khanna's *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* is a very crucial examination of the problems inherent in psychoanalysis as field of inquiry. Rooted in a system of oppositional binaries, psychoanalytic theory only allows for the Self to be understood in terms of white, heterosexual males who identify as such because they are not and cannot identify with the Other. Fanon describes this oppositional relationship in *Black Skin, White Mask*:

When one has grasped the mechanism described by Lacan, one can have no further doubt that the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely. Only for the white man the Other is perceived on the level of the body image, absolutely as the not-self—that is, the unidentifiable, the unassimilable. For the black man, as we have shown, historical and economic realities come into the picture.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> See Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture and Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), Joanne Entwistle, "Fashion and the Fleishy Body: Dress as Embodied Practice," *Fashion Theory* 4:3 (Summer 2000), 323-47, and Kaja Silverman, "Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse," in *On Fashion*, ed. Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferriss (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 183-96.

<sup>78</sup> Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 161.

In the past thirty years, the challenge of examining identity formation from marginalized spaces has often been undertaken from the standpoint of gender and sexuality. Laura Mulvey, Judith Butler, Kaja Silverman, and Amelia Jones are a few of the scholars who have developed alternate views of subjectivity which are essential to disrupting the center of psychoanalytic interpretations of identity formation.

However, situating the historically marginalized subject in the position of the Self contributes little to understanding the relationship between a Black Self and a White Other. The opposition between the self and the other is reliant on a specific structure of power (with the self at the nexus of that power), and as Fanon discusses in *Black Skin, White Mask*, the hierarchy of social relations between the white man and the black man cannot be inverted easily. With regards to the fashion system, power functions in much the same way. The Western system is situated at the center, and it acts *upon* non-Western systems, which exist only in the periphery. Understanding a fashion system in colonial or postcolonial Africa, for example, requires a re-consideration of how power is structured. Rather than a basic system such as the one proposed by Veblen and Simmel in which fashion trickles down in a linear fashion from one (more powerful) class to the next (less powerful) class, power is asserted from more than one location. In the case of Ethiopia, the fashion system is simultaneously acted upon by the royal family, who assert their ideals to the public, and foreigners (i.e., the West), who exert power in a broader, international sense. However, at the same time, the Ethiopian public is likewise influenced directly by foreign styles, both from the West and other African cultures.

This “web” of influences acting upon the Ethiopian fashion system during the mid-twentieth century made it a highly dynamic and flexible system, which reflected as well as manipulated the experience of modernization in the urban environment. Together with images of the modern body in the developing mass media, fashion

functioned in Ethiopia, as in any other location, as a system of power. However, as a system that is inextricably connected to the physical body, fashion is also acted upon by several different forces of power, from both within and beyond the body. The following section considers dressing the body as an embodied practice within the social world.

### *Embodied Practices of Dressing in the Social World*

*Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. It applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument, and when we wish to move about we do not move the body as we move an object. We transport it without instruments as if by magic, since it is ours and because through it we have direct access to space. For us the body is much more than an instrument or a means; it is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions. Even our most secret affective movements, those most deeply tied to the humoral infrastructure, help to share our perception of things.*<sup>79</sup>

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

It seems obvious that academic discourse on the body would consider the relationship between the boundaries of corporeality and the clothing that negotiates the body's physical space; however, the emergence of a sociology of the body in the last thirty years has largely failed to examine clothing itself. Bryan Turner in *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* writes: "there is an obvious and prominent fact about human beings. They have bodies and they are bodies."<sup>80</sup> However, in his examinations, he neglects the apparent fact that human bodies are also dressed bodies.

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<sup>79</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception: and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964) 5.

<sup>80</sup> Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1984), 1.

In all societies, the body is dressed, whether in clothing or jewelry or decorations on and/or modifications of the flesh (i.e., tattoos, scarification, body painting).

Transforming or adorning the naked body transforms it into something recognizable and symbolically meaningful within a culture.

As a symbolic practice that is, in many ways, fundamental to the social order, anthropological investigations of bodily adornment have been crucial to understanding the role of decorating the body within a given society. For example, Andrew and Marilyn Strathern's *Self-Decoration in Mount Hagen* (1971) offers a comprehensive analysis of the functions associated with decorating the body for various social events. The objects used for decoration as well as the manner in which those objects are applied and worn constitute a complex system of symbolic meanings and social values.<sup>81</sup> However, this ethnographic study and others like it often situate the practice of adorning the body in *non-Western* societies within static conditions, neglecting the dynamic and frequently imaginative characteristics of fashioning the body. Only recently have ethnographic studies of bodily decorations in the non-West begun to address the fluidity of clothing and its ability to reaffirm and solidify as well as destabilize and subvert the social order.<sup>82</sup> On the other hand, inquiries into fashion and dress as discussed in the previous section, coming from disciplines such as history and cultural studies, have paid little attention to the body, focusing instead on the communicative aspects of adornment and examining the creative and expressive aspects of dress rather than the role it plays within society. The body as a biological, private entity is connected to the social, public entity through physical adornment, which continually renegotiates the boundaries between the self and the other.

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<sup>81</sup> Andrew and Marilyn Strathern, *Self-Decoration in Mount Hagen* (London: Duckworth Publishing, 1971).

<sup>82</sup> See Hildi Hendrickson, ed. *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), Jean Allman, ed. *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2004)

Therefore, dressing the body is an *embodied* practice, and through this embodiment, the significance of clothing as fashion and the body as a site of social and political action is symbolically created.<sup>83</sup> Considering the body without clothing or clothing without the body is strangely alienating. The naked body is widely considered unacceptable whereas clothing without the body is haunted by the lack of the body. Elizabeth Wilson states that:

There is something eerie about a museum of costume. A dusty silence holds still the old gowns in glass cabinets. In the aquatic half light...the deserted gallery seems haunted. The living observer moves, with a sense of mounting panic, through a world of the dead...We experience a sense of uncanny when we gaze at garments that had an intimate relationship with human beings long since gone to their graves. For clothes are so much part of our living, moving selves that, frozen on display in the mausoleums of culture, they hint at something only half understood, sinister, threatening; the atrophy of the body, and the evanescence of life.<sup>84</sup>

The body and clothing operate dialectically; the body relies on clothing to give it social meaning, and in turn, the body is the surface that gives life to clothing, imbuing the fabric with its own meaning.<sup>85</sup> Clothing lies at the margins of the body and marks the boundaries between the self and the other, between the individual and society. As a boundary, clothing is both a private, individualistic practice as well as a social one. Mary Douglas asserts in *Natural Symbols* in her explorations of human boundaries, both physical and metaphorical, that the boundaries of the body are dangerous. These areas are the points of intersection where the internal and the external jeopardize the balance between the public and the private selves. Thus, clothing and other bodily

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<sup>83</sup> Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress, and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000).

<sup>84</sup> Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 1.

<sup>85</sup> Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson, "The Body Clothed" in *A 100 Years of Art and Fashion* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1998).

adornments, which function at these “leaky” boundaries, are subject to the laws and regulations of a given society.

According to Douglas, there are two bodies: the physical body and the social body:

The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society. There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience to that each reinforces the categories of the other. As a result of this interaction the body itself is a highly restricted medium of expression.<sup>86</sup>

To elaborate, Marcel Mauss describes how the physical body is shaped by culture through an expansion of mundane “techniques of the body.” The techniques he discusses are not natural, but are the *learned* product of particular ways of being in the body that are embedded within culture. Additionally, ways of walking, moving, or making a fist are different for men and women because culture inscribes the bodies of men and women with different physical capacities. Although Mauss does not elaborate on dress, he notes that “the fact that we wear shoes to walk transforms the positions of our feet: we feel it sure enough when we walk without them.”<sup>87</sup> Whether one wears athletic shoes or high heels, the physical response to the clothing worn is different. For example, flat sneakers or tennis shoes signify a casual style or athleticism, both in the object itself and in the way the wearer walks in them.

The restricting or “disciplining” of the physical body is managed through a number of different cultural conventions, including customs, rituals, and social institutions such as schools, hospitals and religious organizations. In *Discipline and*

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<sup>86</sup> Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1970; New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 65. Citations are to the Pantheon edition.

<sup>87</sup> Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” *Economy and Society* 2:1 (1973), 74.

*Punish*, Foucault argues that bodily practices are an element of the processes of power that work to render bodies compliant and docile.<sup>88</sup> For example, on a basic level, clothing often acts as restraints to the threateningly dangerous boundaries of overt sexuality and proper gender roles. Certain bodily treatments such as those that physically bound the body (i.e., corsets and foot-binding) may have been associated with cultural ideals of beauty, but they functioned to restrict the bodies of their wearers, creating bodies that adhered to the social roles within a given society.

However, adorning the body is both a practice of creating docile or appropriate bodies as well as bodies that challenge social conventions. Because of the ways in which bodies are subject to power and discursively constituted, they are also made meaningful and productive and are capable of upsetting the social order. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige asserts that youth subcultures in 1960s and 1970s England created new meanings of style as an instrument of subversion. Hebdige describes how hipsters, beatniks and punks appropriated various ideas from other cultures such as the West Indies, and those appropriations of style were not only visual in form, but were also cultural. The bohemian, anti-capitalist, and anti-industrialist lifestyle was strongly associated with their modes of dressing.<sup>89</sup>

Powerful social statements are made through clothing (or the lack thereof) precisely because of the messages that are coded by society on the body through clothing. Recent propaganda campaigns by social awareness group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have displayed celebrities in the nude stating, “I’d rather go naked than wear fur.” The message that these images convey relies on the meanings behind *wearing* clothing rather than not wearing clothing because the

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<sup>88</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: Birth of a Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

<sup>89</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Metheun, 1979).



text accompanying the photographs implies that clothing *should* be worn, thus the lack of it (by choice) reinforces their statement that wearing fur is unacceptable.

In less extreme forms, clothing and its interaction with the body function on a daily basis as markers of identity, be it social, ethnic, religious and/or economic. In *About Looking*, art critic and cultural historian John Berger discusses the characteristics of the suits worn in two separate photographs by August Sanders. In the first image of village peasants, he asserts that the suits (which in and of themselves indicate a certain sense of formality) give their wearers:

the impression of being uncoordinated, bandy-legged, barrel-chested, low-arsed, twisted or scalene...None of their abnormalities is extreme. They do not provoke pity. They are just sufficient to undermine physical dignity. We look at bodies which appear coarse, clumsy, brute-like. And incorrigibly so.<sup>90</sup>

On the other hand, in the second photograph of four Protestant missionaries, their suits preserve the physical identity and the natural identity of their wearers. Berger writes that: “the clothes convey the same message as...the history of the bodies they hide. Suits, experience, social formation and function coincide.”<sup>91</sup> His example demonstrates how the meaning of clothing changes *through* the body on which it is worn. The physical characteristics of a suit as well as the formality that men’s suits signify remain the same, but the *embodied* characteristics of clothing are altered by the body of the wearer.

At the same time that bodies and the clothing on them actively create systems of power, both elements exist and function within social, economic and political systems of power. Institutionalized power, which Foucault describes as being exerted

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<sup>90</sup> John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980; New York: Vintage International, 1991), 35. Citations are to the Vintage edition.

<sup>91</sup> Berger *About Looking*, 37.

through schools, hospitals, prisons, etc., discipline the body, affecting both “techniques of the body” (i.e., the way one walks, shakes hands, sits at a desk) and the meaning of clothing on the body. In Ethiopia, institutionalized power emerged rapidly, branching out from the imperial center of power to a growing number of social programs. As public services such as education, health and law enforcement emerged in urban centers, the conditions within which the social body was affected by the hegemonic forces of government institutions shifted significantly.

### *Modernity and the Fashionable Body*

In the two previous sections, clothing and the body were discussed exclusively in terms of modern, industrial society. This comes not only from the assumption in Western fashion history that the fashion “system” is a direct product of modernization, but also from the theory that the consciousness of one’s physical appearance developed as a result of an increased awareness of the Other, particularly in urban centers where people began to come in constant contact with strangers on a daily basis. However, removing the fashion system from the context of modernization, clothing still functions as an embodied practice and as a signifier of social and economic status. In the Stratherns’ exploration of bodily adornments in Mt. Hagen, though the nature of decoration is quite different from “fashion”, the primary purpose of serving as indicators of one’s position within society remains the same. Signs written or draped on the body fundamentally function as communicative devices in the social world.

Thus, many of the issues pertaining to modern fashion could easily be discussed in terms of pre-industrial, predominantly rural societies. Yet, to remove the element of modernity from the fashion system is to neglect a significant portion of what makes

fashion, according to so many scholars of fashion history, a uniquely modern phenomenon. For example, in *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing*, Diana Crane's assessment of fashion and identity spans two centuries of fashion in the United States, France and Britain. Her work begins with a quantitative analysis of articles of clothing owned by working class families in the nineteenth century. These articles of clothing that she addresses include aprons and headscarves worn by women on farms and shirts and slacks worn by factory workers, hardly types of dress that qualify as "fashion" within the limited scope of fashion studies.<sup>92</sup> If fashion is defined and defended by scholars like Wilson, Lipovetsky and Davis as being a modern, *Western* system, then Crane's examination of "fashion" in rural America in the 1800s makes clear the fact that the Western aspect of the criteria is more important than the modern. Although Crane's study expands upon the more practical uses of clothing in the mid-nineteenth century and relates those dressing practices to what evolves as a "fashion system" in the twentieth century, no distinctions are made between what is now considered fashion and what is typically categorized as costume or traditional dress.

This type of exclusionary condition essentially creates a vacuum in the field of non-Western fashion studies. Traditional modes of dressing the body in non-Western cultures are not considered fashion by any standards—not until, that is, they are appropriated by Western fashion. The problem of Western appropriation and legitimization of non-Western forms of fashion has been brought to public attention in recent years as celebrities made henna and "tribal" tattooing an instant trend and

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<sup>92</sup> Diana Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

designers from major fashion houses have “borrowed” elements of non-Western textile designs.<sup>93</sup>

Traditional, non-Western clothing remains, regrettably, in a category reserved for things that are *not-quite* fashion. What prevents these clothes from entering the “fashion system” is, paradoxically, not because they are not Western in style, but because they are not *modern*. Once European or American elements of dress were incorporated into African styles of dressing (typically during the colonial period), fashion in Africa began to be discussed, but almost always in terms of the dichotomy between the traditional and the modern.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, at a base level, clothing or “fashion” in Ethiopia appears to emerge only when Western styles enter the dress code. What is disturbingly absent or neglected in this case is that this type of characterization assumes that what existed before was a system entirely unlike the one in the West, if it could be considered a system at all. Additionally, denying the prior system of dress necessarily situates the center of power in the West and negates the possibility of Ethiopian agency or control over its own rapidly changing system.

As the following section demonstrates, Ethiopian forces carefully controlled the various types of fashion that emerged in Ethiopia during the mid-twentieth century. Likewise, modern Ethiopian dress was not an absolute break or rupture from the *social system of dressing* that was already in place. Thus, rather than considering the new suits and dresses that Ethiopian began wearing as an oppositional force that

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<sup>93</sup> Henna/mehndi was popularized by Madonna during the late 1990s when she wore them in music videos; British singer Robbie Williams received traditional Maori *moko* (tattoo) on his left shoulder, but was later criticized for publicly stating that he regretted getting so many tattoos during his rebellious youth; designers Lazaro Hernandez and Jack McCullough for Proenza Schouler created designs incorporating what they describe as “colonial and tribal” in their Spring/Summer 2008 collection [quoted from an interview: *Proenza Schouler – Spring/Summer 2008*. (2007) [Podcast] September 10. Style.com. Available at <www.style.com>, Podcast url <http://downloads.style.com/vodcast/s2008rtw/proenzaschouler090707texted.m4v>, accessed 10 September 2007.]

<sup>94</sup> For example, see Jean and John Comaroff, “Fashioning the Colonial Subject: The Empire’s Old Clothes,” *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997) 218-73.

gradually eradicated the traditional, the new fashion was integrated into the preexisting system. Although the changing fashions were inextricably connected to modernity, fashion in twentieth century Ethiopia was neither necessarily modern nor Western.

Additionally, “modernity” itself was borne and developed under fundamentally different conditions in Ethiopia. Although fundamentally, the articulations of the philosophical traditions that define “modernity” are similar, Ethiopian modernity is characterized through systems of power and tradition that cannot be compared to Western modernity. One of the most significant differences lies in the fact that modernity in Ethiopia is so often ascribed to individual people. At various times and by numerous historians, individuals such as Emperor Tewodros II, Emperor Menelik II, Ras Makonnen and Emperor Haile Selassie have been credited as the true “fathers” of modernity in Ethiopia. The hierarchical nature of the monarchy created a situation in which the chief “negotiations” with modernity occurred within a concentrated social and political circle. Additionally, in Ethiopia where the ruling class was primarily Amhara-speaking, orthodox Christians, both ethnicity and religion were important factors that affected the ways in which the country changed during the twentieth century.

### *Viewing the Dressed Body in Photographs*

In this way, examining the role of photographic images in relation to how they are seen is central to understanding the formation of identities in terms of both the self and the other. Spectatorship is an essential characteristic of photographs, and although vision has held a privileged position in Western society, the human body itself *as a visual form* has been overlooked and under-considered in the discourse on

photography. In Western scholarship where the locus of society is considered to be in man's *intellectual* capacities, the body has merely been the vessel that carries the mind. The historical elevation of the mind/soul ("I think, therefore I am") has been at the expense of critical analyses of the body. The recent subverting of the traditional "puritan-cum-Platonist"<sup>95</sup> distrust of the body during the past few decades—the counter-culture of the 1960s and the feminist movement of the 1970s—has brought attention to the role of the body in society as well as in history.

However, even as critical discourse on the body has increased in recent years, the majority of works that exist on the subject are fragmented in their discussion of the photographed body. Often, the debates are self-contained and fail to consider the history of the body as well as the oppositional roles representations of bodies take in different cultures, particularly in situations of imbalanced power or marginalized groups within a society. For example, Diana Fuss's essay "Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look" provides an innovative and interesting theoretical consideration of women's bodies in fashion advertising during the 1990s, but she fails to consider those images in the broader context of *how* women's bodies came to depict "saleability" and consumption. Fuss makes the assumption that women are *taught* to view images of themselves a certain way, but who or what is situated in the position of the other? And how do images of white women shape or affect women of color? In both psychoanalysis and theories of the modern subject, the self is directly affected by its relationship with the other, but the act of viewing the other from the perspective of *otherness* has largely been neglected in critical discourse.

However, the areas of gender and performance studies have been instrumental in theorizing the role of the imaged body from the standpoint of the Other. Amelia

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<sup>95</sup> Roy Porter, "History of the Body," *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991) 207.

Jones, relying on Judith Butler's work on gender performance, asserts that all images (both of the Self and of the Other) "work to construct bodies and selves across the interpretive bridges that connect them."<sup>96</sup> In other words, a relationship between the self and the image is there, whether the person viewing the image sees him/herself as being "within or without" the image. The relationship can be found in the performative nature of the constructed image. Returning for a moment to the theater analogy of the photographic studio, the self is "performed" in front of the camera, and the act of posing for a portrait involves a material as well as a representational positioning. Barthes writes, "I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing, but...this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality."<sup>97</sup> For Barthes, the act of posing is a possible moment of loss. He fears the alteration of his individuality. However, Hudita Nura Mustafa, in her discussion of women and popular photography in contemporary Senegal, puts forward the possibility that these "moments of (self-) objectification" are neither a loss nor a "figment of generic ideals or cloaks of true selves," but a true self-transformation.<sup>98</sup> Through a re-negotiation of the physical space in front of the camera, the sitters are able to define and assert their identities on their own terms.

If the transformation and subsequent representation of the self in photographic portraiture is considered an *assertion* of identity, then what occurs when the image is viewed? As significant, if not more so, as the construction of the image in front of the camera are the processes of viewing and consumption, particularly for photographic

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<sup>96</sup> Amelia Jones, "The 'Eternal Return': Self Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment," *Signs* 27:4 (Summer 2002) 950.

<sup>97</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 11.

<sup>98</sup> Hudita Nura Mustafa, "Portraits of Modernity: Fashioning Selves in Dakarois Popular Photography," *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Post-colonial Africa*, eds. Paul Landau and Deborah Kaspin (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002) 188.

portraits such as Keïta's and Sidibé's that were created with personal intentions in mind and are now viewed in entirely different contexts of major international photographic exhibitions. Though the move to present photographs of Africans by Africans as artwork certainly persists, there has been a shift towards understand the image in its original context. Manthia Diawara has written extensively about his own experiences growing up in Bamako, Mali in relation to what Keïta's and Sidibé's images represented *within that particular social context*. Diawara argues that Malian youth, rather than aligning themselves with Marxist ideology or revisionist traditionalism as a rebellion against colonialism, chose to fashion their own identities as participants of the international youth culture of the 1960s. By expressing their rebellion against tradition and colonialism, Malian youth embraced a new sort of Pan-Africanism.<sup>99</sup>

The question that remains unanswered, however, is that of the photographs themselves. Photographs are necessarily created and used with the intention of being *viewed*. Did Sidibé's images function as evidence of a rebellious youth, or were they created in order to serve as personal mementos of times gone by? How were these images understood when viewed? A significant amount of importance has been placed on the fashions and appearance of Sidibé's subjects, but in what ways did these photographs also serve as "fashionable" images?

In *The Fashion System*, Roland Barthes analyzes fashion within a semiotic framework, identifying the differences between clothing that adorns the body, photographs of the dressed body, and the written language used to identify the clothed body. He classifies actual clothing as technological, image clothing as iconic, and

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<sup>99</sup> Manthia Diawara, "The Sixties in Bamako: Malick Sidibé and James Brown," *Malick Sidibé Photographs* (Göteborg: Steidl, 2003) 8-22.



written clothing as verbal. Various “shifters” are required to move from one structure to another, and the transformation from one code to another is discontinuous or fragmented.<sup>100</sup> In fashion magazines, which Barthes is singularly concerned with, he argues that the represented garment “affords an immediate methodological advantage over the analysis of real clothing” because the Real is made comprehensible by appropriating it through described language.<sup>101</sup> Barthes privileges language over vision because although the written clothing has no practical or aesthetic function as it describes an imaginary existence rather than a real one, the object converted into language makes sense of the image. Language makes fashion understandable. Like many other cultural theorists and philosophers before and after him, Barthes claims that vision is flawed and unreliable, but his assertion is problematic in that he makes no distinction in viewing an actual body wearing clothing and a photograph of the fashioned body. Though Barthes does claim that there is a difference between image clothing (iconic) and actual clothing (technological), he summarily dismisses vision as being flawed in both instances.

The politics of viewing a fixed image is inherently different from seeing the world in action. The fixed image lends itself to a much more careful reading by virtue of the fact that it remains fixed. The uses of photography as a means of documentation and recordkeeping by government institutions and researchers supports the notion that the image captured by the camera and subsequently looked at essentially functions as truth or evidence. In this case, what is *seen* in a photograph *is* reliable. A witness to a crime may not recall if the suspect was wearing a jacket, but a photograph of the suspect can, with certainty, confirm or deny this as well as his identity and his presence. The photograph functions as a “certificate of presence,” of something having

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<sup>100</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (New York, Hill and Wang, 1983).

<sup>101</sup> Barthes, *Fashion System*, 8.

happened or having been at a particular place and time because as Berger claims, “In itself, the photograph cannot lie.”<sup>102</sup>

However, if the politics of viewing images were this simple, there would certainly be little to debate over on the history and function of photography. Berger continues on to argue that the fact that a photograph provides an exact replica of a moment in time is its *only* truth. Everything else about a photographic image is open to interpretation, and the photograph’s defining characteristic is actually in the uncertainty of its meaning: “All photographs are ambiguous. All photographs have been taken out of a continuity.”<sup>103</sup> Berger elaborates on the difference between photographs as evidence and as a means of communication. He argues that when an image is used scientifically as a form of evidence, its function is limited to confirming identity and presence. Any move beyond that, when lived experiences are involved, the truth of what is seen in a photograph becomes much more complicated.

In spite of the numerous discussions on the true nature of photographs, all photographic images cannot be subjected to the two-dimensional standard that Berger and others have proposed: scientific and communicative. In a discussion of mass media images, Stuart Hall identifies a set of two processes, encoding and decoding, that allow images to convey meanings. He argues that for the messages to work, not only are the images encoded through the twin processes of denotation and connotation, but the audience that views the images must be able to identify and relate to those coded messages.<sup>104</sup> Though Hall is primarily concerned with mass media images, the same principles can be applied to certain photographic practices, particularly portraiture. The portrait photograph is carefully constructed with a great deal of

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<sup>102</sup> Berger, *Ambiguity*, 53.

<sup>103</sup> Berger, *Ambiguity*, 50.

<sup>104</sup> Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*, eds. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, Paul Willis (London: Unwin Hyman, 1980) 128-138.

consideration given to background, props, lighting, pose and clothing. The portrait is *intended* to communicate a particular message about its subject, and for the most part, the choices that are made about the aesthetics of the image are recognizable conventions within the given society. Take, for example, the portrait of a man in Figure 2.3 by Togolese photographer Alex Agbalgo Acolatse. In the colonial context of the 1930s, the man's clothing is indicative of a particular position in society. Dressed in a full suit, bowtie and shiny black dress shoes, his clothes signify an urban man of wealth. Additionally, the leather-bound book he holds tucked in his right arm communicate to the viewer that he is either educated or aspires to be so. Although these aesthetic conventions are Western, applied within an African context, the message encoded within the image is conveyed to its viewer precisely because the meanings exist within Togo society. What is "written" on the body in society is circulated and multiplied through the photograph.

The meaning of clothing and other personal adornments are not, however, limited to the scope of what is considered normal or fashionable in society. Clothing is also used as a means of subversion as Diawara claims is the case in Malick Sidibé's photographs of Malian youth culture. Both Keïta's and Sidibé's portrait photographs have been discussed in terms of a new way of looking and of being seen in the context of African portraiture. Lamunière describes their portraits as existing "at the threshold between private and public life" because of their functions either as personal mementos or as postcards to share with friends and family.<sup>105</sup> The style of the subjects' poses as well as their choice in clothing help construct highly personal representations of the self. In comparison to the photograph by Acolatse, the Malian portraits from the 1960s are different in aesthetic style, but the manner in which the

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<sup>105</sup> Michelle Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That: The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 13.

body in performed and perceived through the photographic space remains analogous in that the image itself is *read* in the same ways. What changes over time and across space is the social context in which the photograph exists. In colonial Togo, the black suit may have represented social capital, and the book may have indicated the importance of education. In Keïta's and Sidibé's portraits, the clothing, pose and props similarly reflected important social and cultural ideals that were relevant to the times and were perceived as such by all of the participants in the life cycle of the image, both encoders and decoders, the creators of the photograph and the people who viewed it.

Thus, photographic portraits from imperial Ethiopia essentially functioned (as representations of the human form) in the same manner as those from different places and times—as carefully crafted, personal representations of the self. However, within the context of the monarchy and Ethiopia's presence in the international arena, portraits of the royal family additionally performed as a means of fashioning modern bodies within the urban landscape.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Imaging the Monarchy

In 1897, a number of photographic publications celebrating Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee were published throughout her "Empire." *The Queen, Her Empire, and the English-Speaking World* used nearly 200 photographic reproductions to portray the "good, pure home-life at the head of the nation."<sup>106</sup> In *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*, James Ryan argues that these images functioned as a means of "visual instruction" throughout the British Empire. The distribution of and education through this "picturing" of empire "was a powerful means of shaping the identities and loyalties of colonial subjects at home as well as abroad."<sup>107</sup>

The Ethiopian monarchy was similarly concerned with projecting a particular image of the empire and the imperial agenda. During Emperor Haile Selassie's reign, spanning over four decades, the emperor and other members of the royal family made use of photographs and public visibility as a tool of educating the masses. Through "picturing" the Ethiopian empire, viewers at home and abroad constructed a visual account of the country's rapidly developing relationship with modernity.

Unlike other representations, images of the royal body function in unique ways, often as both instructive and assertive tools, which serve political and social agendas. In the years prior to the U.S. acquisition of the Hawaiian Islands, Hawaii's

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<sup>106</sup> *The Queen, Her Empire and the English-Speaking World*, Diamond Jubilee Edition, (London, 1897) viii.

<sup>107</sup> James Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 186.

Queen Lili'uokalani stressed the continuity and dignity of the modern Hawaiian monarchy through formal portraits of the late King Kalakaua, Queen Kapi'ulani, and the heir apparent, Princess Ka'iulani, published in the queen's book *Hawaii's Story by Hawaii's Queen*. Notably, the first illustration in the book, a full-page, formal, photographic portrait of "Her Majesty Queen Liliuokalani" stands in stark contrast to cartoonish depictions of the queen often found in the popular American media at the time. Lydia Kualapai writes that:

By focusing the visual elements of the text on the nation's civic concerns and the ruling family, the queen presents the Hawaiian monarchy as a stable, autonomous government capably managing the affairs and problems of a flourishing nation. Under such conditions, the reader should realize, annexation becomes politically indefensible.<sup>108</sup>

In the case of Haile Selassie, his self-image functioned in much the same way as portraits of the royal family in Hawaii. The emperor's portraits elicited a sense of legitimacy and authority through the careful presentation of his physical body. His clothing as well as that of his children was directly representative of the shifting ideals of the governing body and their role within that government from the 1930s to the 1970s.

This chapter examines the Ethiopian monarchy from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century as it began to assert an international presence and actively engage with the philosophical traditions of modernity. However, this discussion of portraiture and "fashioning modernity" is also situated within Ethiopia's historical legends and myths of origin as well as its strongly asserted connections to Christianity, which in many ways, was emphasized as a unique quality, something that

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<sup>108</sup> Lydia Kualapai, "The Queen Writes Back: Lili'uokalani's *Hawaii's Story by Hawaii's Queen*" *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 17:2 (2005) 49.

set Ethiopia apart from other African countries. Within this particular context, this chapter deconstructs Emperor Haile Selassie's public image and considers the emperor's clothing as it related to the country's social and political agendas.

### *Modernity and Monarchy in Ethiopia*

Ethiopia's monarchical legacy claims its beginnings in the tenth century B.C.E. when Makeda, also known as the Queen of Sheba, traveled to Jerusalem in ancient Egypt to visit King Solomon, a ruler she had heard was blessed with extraordinary wisdom. The stories of her travels, her conversion to Christianity, the night she spent in King Solomon's bed, and their son Banya Lehkem who grew up to become the first Christian emperor of Ethiopia are chronicled in the *Kebra Negast*, the "Glory of Kings," the holy book of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.<sup>109</sup> This longstanding history of the religion as well as the monarchy remains an integral element of Ethiopian culture and identity. Over time, the monarchy's role in governance has fluctuated, but despite various crises over the centuries such as the fall of the medieval Ethiopian empire in 1529, it is claimed that the Solomonic dynasty maintained rule from 1270 until Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown in 1974.

As a powerful empire that was firmly established and supported by the Orthodox Church, Ethiopia remained uniquely separated from the rest of the world for almost 300 years. Historians have often attributed the empire's strong insular nature to events that occurred during the sixteenth century. Following a century of disaster and the overthrowing of the then emperor by a Moslem leader, Ahmed Gran, Sultan of Adal, the Ethiopian army relied on the aid of the Portuguese in order to defeat the

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<sup>109</sup> See Miguel Brooks, ed., trans., *A Modern Translation of the Kebra Nagast: The Glory of Kings* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1996).

foreign invasion. However, the Portuguese brought with them new problems, and attempts to convert Ethiopia to Roman Catholicism resulted in another century of civil war. In 1632, the Portuguese were expelled from the country, and a strong suspicion of foreigners remained a crucial factor in the Ethiopian empire's relationship with the rest of the world until the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>110</sup>

However, the lack of foreign interaction was not the most significant reason for the strength of Ethiopia's monarchy. Following the Portuguese missionary efforts that damaged the country's faith in the monarchy, there was a conscious attempt to reunite the church and state. Ethiopia's first capital city was founded in Gondar where the imperial compound was surrounded by churches and residences for the most important religious figures: the head of the Ethiopian Church and the abbot of Debra Libanos monastery. A major change in public perception of the monarchy was brought by shifting from a system in which the emperor tended to circulate around his empire, traveling to remote regions with his entourage to a system in which the emperor ruled his empire from a fixed location. During the medieval period, the frequent movement of the emperors had functioned as a cohesive force as his presence and authority was felt at the local level, but with the foundation of a permanent compound in Gondar, the monarch had less direct influence on remote areas of the empire and withdrew from public life. Emperors were only seen in public on special occasions, and they frequently communicated with others through interlocutors. Historian Patrick Gilkes asserts that though the monarchy's withdrawal from public life weakened imperial control, "[it] was perhaps the prime reason for the survival of the institution."<sup>111</sup> Supported by the holiness bestowed upon the throne by the Church, the Solomonic

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<sup>110</sup> Patrick Gilkes, *The Dying Lion: Feudalism and Modernization in Ethiopia* (London: Julian Friedman Publishers, 1975).

<sup>111</sup> Gilkes, *Dying Lion*, 6.



dynasty also became shrouded in a mystique that helped elevate its influence and authority.

Though the country remained relatively stable over the next two centuries, the role of the monarch in the rule of his empire waxed and waned. By the time Emperor Tewodros was crowned in 1855, monarchical power had declined significantly. Tewodros is often considered to be the first Ethiopian emperor who truly began the process of modernization because of his policies of reform; however, those policies were typically no more than an attempt to restore traditional, imperial powers. In his efforts to reestablish imperial power, he reintroduced the concept of the moving capital, realizing that the fixed capital in Gondar was unacceptable for the implementation of his policies. However, Tewodros' emphasis on the myth of the emperor as savior and on his own position as supreme judge of the land was detrimental to both national and foreign relations. The emperor suffered a massive military defeat in 1868 which was incited by his imprisonment of a large group of Europeans, including the British Consul Charles Duncan Cameron and Henry Aaron Stern, a Protestant missionary and one of the first photographers to visit the country.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Though primarily concerned with his missionary work, Stern published twenty engravings based on his photographs in a book, *Wanderings Among the Falashas in Abyssinia* (London, 1862), which contained portraits of Ethiopians including Abuna Salama, the head of the Ethiopian church, scenes of the then capital Dabra Tabor, and one of the castles at the old capital Gondar. For more information, see Pankhurst, 1976. Unlike many of his predecessors, Emperor Tewodros was somewhat tolerant of missionaries in the country though this was most likely because missionaries like Henry Stern focused their efforts on the *Falashas*, or the Ethiopian Jews. The mitigating factor for his sudden imprisonment and torture of European missionaries was the fact that the British Foreign Office had not acknowledged his request for an exchange of ambassadors. According to Stern, the emperor resolved "to humble the pride of Europe," and ordered all European missionaries to be detained. For more information, see Robert L. Hess, "Introduction to the Second Edition," *Wanderings Among the Falashas in Abyssinia Together with a Description of the Country and its Various Inhabitants* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (1862; London: Frank Cass and Company, 1968) vii-xxxiii, and Girima-Selassie Asfaw, David L. Appleyard, and Edward Ullendorff, *The Amharic Letters of Emperor Theodore of Ethiopia to Queen Victoria and Her Special Envoy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979).

Shortly after his defeat and as the country erupted into another civil war, the emperor committed suicide.<sup>113</sup>

Ethiopia's true relationship with modernity began during the reign of Emperor Menelik II who assumed the throne in 1889. Menelik II established a new capital city, Addis Ababa, which he later linked by railway to the sea, creating a genuine urban center with opportunities for commercial development. During Menelik's time, the city grew to a population of about fifty thousand and featured modern telephone and telegraph services, some brick and stone buildings, hotels, cafés, and the imperial palace, which featured indoor plumbing and flush toilets.<sup>114</sup> Additionally, Emperor Menelik was highly interested in fortifying relationships with European countries. In 1902, he sent a diplomatic envoy, which included *Ras* Makonnen, the Governor of Harar and father of the future Emperor Haile Selassie, to attend the coronation ceremony of King Edward VII [See Figure 2.4]. During the trip, the group of Ethiopian leaders additionally visited Italy, France, Turkey and Germany at Emperor Menelik's instruction.

Emperor Menelik played a significant role in developing numerous aspects of “modern” life in Ethiopia. He actively sought out new technologies and invited foreigners to come to Ethiopia and advise him on equipping his countrymen with the education and training for self-sufficiency in the modern world. As opposed to most countries in the colonial situation, Menelik exerted his own power to dictate the terms of European intervention in the modernizing process. Early in his reign, the emperor

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<sup>113</sup> The British military expedition that was sent to Ethiopia to “rescue” Emperor Tewodros' captives is known as the Abyssinian Campaign. Photographs were central to justifying this “small war”—James Ryan states that the photographs of the conflict focus largely on the British forces on the one hand and an empty Ethiopian landscape on the other, implying that the British were primarily conducting a war against the hostile forces of nature and that there were no indigenous peoples in harms way. For a detailed discussion of the use of photographs from the Abyssinian Campaign, see Ryan, *Picturing Empire*, esp. pp. 73-98.

<sup>114</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik II: Ethiopia, 1844-1913* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) 200.

invited a group of three Swiss craftsmen to help with the modernization of his country. The most notable of the three was Alfred Ilg, an engineer and amateur photographer who developed a close relationship with the emperor, working with him for several years as well as becoming a dear friend and confidante. As early as 1888, Menelik II was photographed by European explorers and researchers; however, following his victory over the Italians at the Battle of Adwa (1896), the number of visitors as well as photographers increased significantly in Addis Ababa as Europeans dispatched numerous missions to the formidable emperor and his court.<sup>115</sup> Additionally, Ilg regularly photographed the Emperor and Empress, and many of the photographs of Menelik II that exist today are credited to the Swiss engineer. Conrad Keller, Ilg's biographer, relates that Emperor Menelik had been very curious about this little black box that had been stuffed with "my whole town, together with houses, people and mules" as well the emperor himself "standing on my head with my legs in the air."<sup>116</sup> In response, Ilg found it necessary to teach the emperor the technical workings of a camera and how a photograph was produced through the use of lenses and light. Later, a German traveler Feliz Rosen recalled that Menelik had "for many years known not only the phenomenon of the photographic camera, but much else in the field of applied physics, mechanics and chemistry."<sup>117</sup>

Despite being photographed often, it not until the last years of his reign that Menelik II began to realize the full extent to which photographic images could capture the majesty of the monarchy. It was only in 1905 that Menelik hired the first professional photographer to work for him, Bedros Boyadjian, an Armenian immigrant who later became the official court photographer and whose two sons,

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<sup>115</sup> Richard Pankhurst, "The Genesis of Photography in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa," *British Journal of Photography*, 123:41 (1976) 849.

<sup>116</sup> Conrad Keller, *Alfred Ilg* (Frauenfeld and Peipzig, 1918) 35.

<sup>117</sup> Felix Rosen, *Eine deutsche Gesandtschaft in Abessinien* (Leipzig, 1907) 277, quoted in Pankhurst 952.

Haigaz and Torkom (Tony), would continue the family business as official court photographers for Emperor Haile Selassie I.<sup>118</sup> Of the many portrait photographs that exist today of Emperor Menelik, there are only a few that depict the emperor in full imperial regalia. These portraits, most of which were taken by Bedros Boyadjian, begin to use the photographic medium to portray the image of a large, powerful leader, a technique that Emperor Haile Selassie would increasingly rely on during his reign.

In addition to Menelik II's interest in modernizing his country through the building of roads, schools, hospitals and the implementation of various civil services, he also opened the borders of Ethiopia to immigration. Settler societies in Ethiopia gradually increased, and in many respects, anyone could become thoroughly "Abyssinianized" by adopting Amharic or Orthodox Christianity.<sup>119</sup> The Armenian community began to develop in Ethiopia's urban centers with the first immigrants arriving as early as the 1870s, significantly sooner than the onset of the persecution and genocide that led to a mass exodus from their homeland beginning in 1909. Armenians brought with them technical skills that they had acquired in the Ottoman

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<sup>118</sup> Many of the photographs taken by the Boyadjian family that are available in the archives at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies are stamped and attributed to either Bedros Boyadjian, Haigaz Boyadjian or Tony Boyadjian. However, the stamps are not necessarily accurate in that it is possible that the person who created the specific print stamped the image with his name. Some photographs that were taken far too early to be attributed to Tony, the youngest son, are sometimes stamped "T. Boyadjian" and multiple prints of the same image sometimes bear the stamps of two different people. Bedros Boyadjian began taking photographs for the royal court during Emperor Menelik's reign in 1906 and continued to do so until 1916 when problems at the end of *Lij Iyasu's* deposition led to a number of financial difficulties. Bedros Boyadjian died in 1928. In 1929, the then Prince Regent *Ras Tafari* officially made Haigaz Boyadjian the official court photographer. Tragically, Haigaz died just one month before Ethiopia's liberation at the age of 40. Tony Boyadjian assumed the position in 1941 at the young age of 21 and continued to work as the royal court photographer. (At this point, he was one of several court photographers, but having had a long history with the emperor, it is said that Tony Boyadjian was Haile Selassie's favorite.) In terms of dating the identifying the photographs, I am relying on the names that were stamped on the images, except for when there is a discrepancy with the approximate date of the image or if the same image is attributed to more than one person. In these cases, I have noted whose name appears on the photograph, but that the possibility exists that it was taken by another person. For additional information about the Boyadjian photographers, see Abebe Berhanu, *Les Boyadjian: Photographes arméniens à la cour du Négus* [exhibition catalogue] (Paris: Jeu de Paume, 2007).

<sup>119</sup> See Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest: Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 72.

Empire, particularly in the photographic field. Christian Armenians, coming from a predominantly Muslim region where the recreation of human likeness was prohibited according to Islamic beliefs, were well suited to train and work as photographers.<sup>120</sup> In Ethiopia, Christian Armenians were able to integrate easily for a number of different reasons. Not only was there a great demand for their various skills, but also their shared religious beliefs as Christians and the support they received from the monarchy supported the growth of the Armenian community.

Because of the unique relationship formed between Menelik II and European powers, Ethiopians played a significantly larger role in the development of photography in their country for their own uses. Rather than a technology that was imposed upon the country, which was largely the case with photography in colonial Africa, Menelik II and Emperor Haile Selassie after him carefully controlled the uses of their images through hiring their own photographers and regulating the circulation of images. However, the photographic styles of the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, prior to the active engagement of Ethiopians with the ways in which they were represented, were quite similar in style and subject matter as other photographs from Africa at the time. Taken mostly by European photographers, they consist of images of landscapes, living quarters, and men and women engaging in everyday activities. Formal portraits were often limited to people of higher social and political status such as provincial governors and military leaders. Typically dressed in official or royal traditional clothing, these early portraits were aesthetically simple in that they were of seated individuals looking directly at the camera against a plain backdrop. The circulation of these portraits was also limited [see Figure 2.8]. Though the first newspaper, a 4-page, handwritten weekly, was introduced in 1895, photographs did not appear regularly in print until the 1930s. Prior to the proliferation

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<sup>120</sup> Monti, *Africa Then*, 7.

of the mass media, photographs did receive some circulation as postcard images and printed booklets. However, these means of circulation were most likely limited to European distribution and consumption.

As contact with Europe and neighboring countries increased, the aesthetic quality of formal portraiture in Ethiopia began to develop a distinct style. Influenced by European as well as Orientalist concepts of portrait-making, Ethiopian portraits from the 1930s and 1940s often employed the use of background settings containing romantic landscapes, flowers and pedestals, classical columns and Oriental rugs. As opposed to many other instances throughout Africa where European and/or Orientalist concepts of design and aesthetics were both brought *and applied* by outsiders, Ethiopians themselves wielded a great deal of power in terms negotiating their own relationship with foreign influences, not only in the field of photography and self-representation. In much the same way that early photography in Europe adopted the aesthetics of the painterly tradition, photographs in Ethiopia began with “imitations” of established modes of photographic representation. Gradually, a distinctly Ethiopian style of portraiture emerged, which will be discussed with greater detail later in this chapter.

Although the Ethiopian landscape made it a geographically difficult country to penetrate during the “Scramble for Africa,” the persistent and sometimes unorthodox actions of Ethiopian leaders (such as Tewodros’ imprisonment of British citizens in an attempt to acquire Queen Victoria’s attention and Menelik’s defeat of the Italians at the Battle of Adwa) established the aggressive role of the monarchy in preventing a forceful incursion by European forces. During Emperor Haile Selassie’s reign, the import of Western technologies was aggressively regulated; however, the practice of maintaining an *active* exchange had been well established by his predecessor.

The characterization of photography in Africa as a tool of colonialism and empire-building has been a common theme in academic inquiries into African photography. As discussed in Chapter Two, Sontag describes a metaphorical relationship of the camera as a weapon that one “aims” and “shoots” in order to “capture” an image, thus possessing the person or thing that is photographed. In Ethiopia, the power to create images of and essentially “fashion” Ethiopians was removed from European hands to varying degrees from the moment the technology was first brought to the country, allowing a space in which the rapport between the photographer and the photographed was not a reconstruction of the inequities of colonialism. It would be neglectful to say that Ethiopia was not affected by the colonial enterprise. Though brief, the Italian occupation of Ethiopia brought with it lasting effects of both colonialism and fascism. However, because colonialism was never fully institutionalized in Ethiopia, the task of modernizing the country rested largely in the hands of Ethiopians, albeit a small number of Ethiopians with very particular motivations.

In addition to what the Italian colonial agenda brought to Ethiopia during the occupation from 1936 to 1941, Haile Selassie, who spent those five years in exile in England, brought various objects and ideas to implement in his own country. A common anecdote regarding Haile Selassie’s return from Europe claims that the emperor brought back leather shoes from England for the soldiers in the Ethiopian military after his period of exile. Though the country’s educated elite had long since had access to shoes, which were either part of the ceremonial costumes or were simple leather sandals to protect the bottoms of the feet, the emperor made leather lace-up shoes a part of the military uniform after his return. There is no definitive proof that the idea of making shoes a part of the uniform was brought over from Europe by the

emperor himself; however, photographs from before the Italian invasion do indicate that the wearing of shoes was uncommon.<sup>121</sup>

Like this story about the shoes, Haile Selassie's role as a proprietor of modernization grew to the point that he could easily be characterized as the father of a new era. The emperor's relationship with the philosophical traditions of modernity began early in his childhood, and was influenced a great deal by both his father *Ras Makonnen's* and Emperor Menelik's progressive ideas. As he was being groomed to become the next emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie traveled to Europe in 1923 after he had received the title of Crown Prince and had been appointed regent, but seven years before he was to be named emperor.<sup>122</sup> When he was still known as *Ras Tafari*, many of the future emperor's goals were already well under way, and he had worked diligently to foster relationships with Europe and the United States. He had already affected a great deal of change with regards to modernization and entered into the international arena by securing Ethiopia's place in the League of Nations. As *Ras Tafari*, he re-abolished slavery and continued to build upon the schools, hospitals and other public service institutions that Emperor Menelik had set forth.

However, following the Italian invasion, the environment changed considerably. The concept of modernizing the country no longer existed solely among the powerful and educated; the Ethiopian people also began to situate themselves as citizens of a modern nation. The years following Haile Selassie's return to Ethiopia were a time of great excitement, not just because of the country's victory over fascist

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<sup>121</sup> However, as Figure 4.10 indicates, European-style shoes were brought to Ethiopia for Haile Selassie's coronation in 1930. Additionally, Figure 2.4 depicts Ras Makonnen and his entourage during their trip to England, and all of the men are wearing shoes. It is unknown, however, if the men wore shoes only because they were traveling in Europe, or if shoes had already become a common practice among the Ethiopian elite.

<sup>122</sup> The trip had made such an impression on him that Haile Selassie devotes 40 pages of his autobiography *My Life and Ethiopia's Progress* to discussions of what he had learned and hoped to realize in his own country.



Italy and the return of its emperor, but also because of the international implications of the Western powers' support of the Ethiopian agenda (although it took nearly five years to *convince* the League of Nations to stand by its own covenant of solidarity and peaceful relations among its members). The nation's triumph manifested itself in a number of different ways, both on the government's administrative level and on the public, cultural level. A great deal of civil services and educational institutions were implemented including the nation's first university and school of modern art. Diplomatic relations with foreign countries increased significantly, and Ethiopia was truly emerging as a *modern* nation.

Historian Teshale Tibebu writes in *The Making of Modern Ethiopia, 1896-1974* that modernity in Ethiopia meant three things:

...politically, the recognition of Ethiopia's sovereignty in the global interstate system, on the one hand, and the formation of the modern state with its monopoly of legitimate violence, on the other; economically, peripheralization in the world economy, which began with the export of essential commodities like coffee to the world market; and culturally, the immersion into the universality project of the modern West, consummated in the secular religion of the Enlightenment: the idea of progress.<sup>123</sup>

With Haile Selassie's return to the throne in 1941, a major achievement was made in the realm of politics. In terms of the Ethiopian economy, the massive restructuring of the feudal system, the abolishment of slavery, and the separation of the producers from the means of production resulted in the growth of urban centers and rural proletarianization.<sup>124</sup> One of the most important ways in which the path to modernity was paved in the cultural realm was through public education. Though Emperor

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<sup>123</sup> Teshale Tibebu, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia, 1896-1974* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1995) xxii.

<sup>124</sup> For an in depth discussion of economic changes in Ethiopia during the twentieth century, see Teshale, especially Chapter 6, "The Destruction of Old and Formation of New Class Relations."

Menelik II had opened the first state-sponsored primary school in 1907, government commitment to education began in earnest with Haile Selassie.<sup>125</sup>

Prior to the Italian invasion, Haile Selassie ordered the building of numerous schools, hired foreign teachers, and even paid parents to send their sons to school. During the Italian occupation, all government schools as well as mission schools, which had also been protected by the emperor, were closed. With his return to power, government efforts were focused again on education. The emperor identified himself as the creator and defender of modern education in Ethiopia, and maintained his role as the “intellectual father of his students” throughout his lifetime.<sup>126</sup> He made countless visits to the nation’s schools, sometimes bringing gifts for the students and handing out certificates, and he financially supported the most promising students’ studies abroad.<sup>127</sup> Students who successfully completed their education overseas and later, graduates of the University College of Addis Ababa were frequently congratulated in person by the emperor.

Haile Selassie’s enthusiasm for education had a variety of effects on Ethiopian culture and society, some positive and some negative. Modern education in Ethiopia was imported from Great Britain and the United States, and was in many ways not

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<sup>125</sup> The Ethiopian Orthodox clergy has taught in schools attached to the churches of northern and central Ethiopia since the fifth or sixth century; however, secular subjects such as science, history and geography were not a part of the curriculum. On the other hand, painting, music and the writing of poetry were taught through the church schools. Enrollment at church-sponsored schools was very low and only highly dedicated students were able to pursue their education. For more information about education in Ethiopia, see Edouard Trudeau, “Higher Education in Ethiopia,” Ph.D. diss., University of Montreal, 1964.

<sup>126</sup> Despite Haile Selassie’s public support of education, the full extent of the emperor’s dedication to education is questionable. In *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: The Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century*, Bahru Zewde (2002) writes that these “pioneers of change” had hoped that Haile Selassie would support their plight to modernize the national economy and to implement legal reforms in order to ensure equality. To their disappointment, Haile Selassie was more interested in using them against his political opponents than in using their ideas to advance the cause of modernity. After the Italian invasion, in which most of the Ethiopian intellectuals were killed, Haile Selassie had little use for them and their reformist ideas.

<sup>127</sup> Randi Rønning Balsvik, *Haile Sellassie’s Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution, 1952-1974* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Addis Ababa University Press, 2005), 4.

suited to the country's needs. For most of the students who came from rural areas, the school was essentially an alien institution that had little to no relevance in their daily lives. Additionally, all primary school instruction was in Amharic, which was a serious impediment for the nearly 40 percent of all students whose first language was not Amharic, and for students who managed to overcome the obstacles they faced in their primary and secondary education, they were faced with yet another hurdle as university classes were taught in English.<sup>128</sup>

However, the emphasis on education was crucial to the fluidity of cultural exchange that occurred during the mid-twentieth century in Ethiopia. Prior to the Italian occupation, approximately 200 Ethiopians had received an advanced education abroad. During the occupation, all educational efforts were brought to a halt, and with the exception of the few that lived in exile, a vast majority of educated Ethiopians were killed. Following liberation, the number of students studying abroad increased significantly, and by 1970, Ethiopian students could be found in about 40 countries and on all continents.<sup>129</sup> The emperor's eagerness for academic advancement of his citizens was not, however, limited to sending students abroad, which would have inevitably created a situation in which the exchange of ideas only moved in one direction. In 1946, Haile Selassie invited a group of French-Canadian Jesuit teachers to help organize the educational system in Ethiopia, provided that they did not make any attempts to convert Ethiopians to Roman Catholicism. In addition to making provisions that would essentially protect various aspects of Ethiopian tradition and culture, the emperor insisted on an independent university system rather than one that

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<sup>128</sup> University classes are still taught in English, and from my own experience teaching a graduate level writing workshop at Addis Ababa University, language remains a significant obstacle for students. Though English is the "official" language of the university, classes are often taught in Amharic by Amhara professors. Written assignments are required to be completed in English, which is particularly challenging for students who attended secondary school in rural Ethiopia.

<sup>129</sup> Balsvik, *Haile Selassie's Students*, 21.

was affiliated with an American or European institution, which was typically the case in African universities.<sup>130</sup>

Certainly, there were also negative consequences to refusing affiliation with established centers of Western education, but it is important to consider the significance of Ethiopia's actions within the context of the Euro-American relationship with Africa at the time. Haile Selassie's goal to develop Ethiopia into an independent and self-sufficient, modern nation during a time when most African countries were still struggling with the oppression of colonialism is significant, regardless of the success or failure of his methods. Additionally, the support of the Ethiopian agenda was further buttressed by outside forces that were beyond the scope of what Haile Selassie could have imagined. Though the emperor actively campaigned for a particular image of himself and his country to Western nations, the endorsements he received from the African Diaspora, particularly the Rastafarian Movement in Jamaica, was unanticipated.<sup>131</sup>

Though as Orthodox Christians, neither Haile Selassie nor the Ethiopian people believed the emperor to be the Messiah, the Rastafarian Movement certainly served to elevate his status in the international arena in a peculiar way. Outside of Jamaica, where Haile Selassie was perhaps not revered as the Most High God, the emperor's public image was that of a powerful emperor, whether or not people around the world understood or appreciated his role as such. Much of the emperor's public image was carefully "packaged" through his physical appearance, and the manipulation of the royal body likewise manipulated public perception of the emperor,

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<sup>130</sup> Balsvik, *Haile Selassie's Students*, 22.

<sup>131</sup> For more information on the Rastafarian Movement and Ethiopia, see Horace Campbell, "Ethiopianism, Pan-Africanism and Garveyism," *Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1987) 43-67.

his country, and the Ethiopian people. Thus, dressing the body is central to understanding Haile Selassie's role both in and out of Ethiopia.

### *Dressing the Ethiopian Body*

In much the same way that photography in Africa is closely associated with colonialism, a vast majority of the existing inquiries into dressing the African body are directly related to European contact and the civilizing mission. In Jean and John Comaroff's *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*, clothing the "naked" African body is discussed in terms of equating the dressed body to a civilized body, a body that through being properly covered was somehow closer to God.<sup>132</sup> As discussed in Chapter Two, missionaries photographed and documented their successful conversion of "savage heathens" to civilized and "well-dressed" Christians as if an appropriately dressed body reflected a person's inner qualities and characteristics. Colonial administrations were equally as adamant about the *appearance* of civility, and the missionary Henry Aaron Stern writes that:

In visiting a remote country, the appearance of the inhabitants produces the most striking impressions. The idea that the dress, features, and bearings of a people tolerably well indicate their intellectual acquirements, and comparative progress in the arts of civilized life, may perhaps account for this interest.<sup>133</sup>

However, the Comaroffs argue that the importance of dressing the body was not merely part of the civilizing mission and a sign of the conversion to Christianity, but it also signaled a means of commodifying the body. By the time Europeans began

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<sup>132</sup> Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 218-73.

<sup>133</sup> Stern, *Wanderings Among the Falashas*, 310.

to settle in Africa, how the body itself was dressed had long been established in Europe as a commodified fashion system in which consumption was a major index of social standing. In numerous encounters with the “improperly” clothed natives, neither the consumptive aspect nor the visible markers of social status were apparent to the European eye. Aside from the more obvious differences in and “problem” of nakedness, the Comaroffs describe this perceived lack of classificatory dressing as a “disturbing” absence of social order for Europeans.<sup>134</sup>

In Ethiopia, however, there was a very visible classificatory system of dressing the body. Not only did the nobility dress differently from the rest of the population, but there were also distinct differences in dress among those in power, signifying their titles and roles within the feudal system. The title of the wearer was distinguishable through the various colors and fabrics of their ceremonial robes, and sumptuary laws prevented people of lower classes to imitate the dress of the nobility. Among those who could afford to, styles of clothing varied for different social situations. Men of the nobility, in particular, dressed the part of their professional roles. As military leaders, their clothing differed significantly from how they presented themselves as governing bodies. Additionally, members of the clergy dressed in robes that did not differ too greatly in style of Roman Catholic priests, another visual signifier of a social system that was somewhat more familiar to the European mode of dressing.

The written accounts of European travelers in Ethiopia before the mid-nineteenth century, though limited, reveal that dressing and adorning the body was a highly social practice. Clothing and accessories such as jewelry long functioned as status symbols, and sumptuary laws were widely enforced with regards to style, materials, colors of fabrics, hairstyles as well as optional adornments such as shoes. During the seventeenth century, Jesuit missionary Manoel de Almeida reported that

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<sup>134</sup> Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 227-9.

“no one but the King” or “a close relative or favourite” was allowed to wear anything but “breeches” and a “piece of cloth” used as a wrap.<sup>135</sup> Gradually, other members of the nobility were allowed to wear materials and fabrics other than cotton, such as gold thread, silks and velvet, clothes worn by peasants for the most part remained the same until the twentieth century.

The richest and most descriptive account of Ethiopian modes of dressing the body prior to significant contact with the foreigners comes from Henry Aaron Stern’s *Wanderings Among the Falashas in Abyssinia* (1862). His description of Ethiopian appearance and dress from the mid-nineteenth century foreshadows the perception of Ethiopians that would eventually dominated the Western media during Emperor Haile Selassie’s reign more than seven decades later:

...on entering Abyssinia, the traveller at once perceives that he is in the midst of a race superior in every respect to all the other tribes of Central Africa. The negro cast of countenance—the stamp of Ham’s oppressed descendants, almost disappears on the Alpine heights of Ethiopia, and, instead of it, the men and women one sees possess features and symmetry of form that may justly be termed handsome. To give a full delineation of their person is an easy task, since in every respect a genuine Abyssinian resembles a bronze statue, which the greatest sculptor might safely take for his model...Erect and slender, they are still not devoid of muscular strength, nor that symmetrical roundness which so much contributes to the beauty of the human frame.<sup>136</sup>

Though there are plenty of instances throughout Stern’s narrative in which he describes certain practices as savage or barbaric, his descriptions of the Abyssinian appearance in general reflect his perception of them as being of higher regard than the other “tribes” of Africa. It is also important to note that though Stern expresses the fact

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<sup>135</sup> Richard Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia: The Northern and Central Highlands from Early Medieval Times to the Rise of Emperor Tewodros II* (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, 1990) 25.

<sup>136</sup> Stern, *Wanderings Among the Falashas*, 310-1.

that he encountered people “who exhibit every shade of colour,” he exclusively describes the clothing and customs of the Amhara,<sup>137</sup> and at times, inaccurately so:

The costume of the Abyssinian is exceedingly simple. Men of all ranks, from the King to the beggar, wear a *shama*, or loose dress of white cotton, which, in graceful folds, is thrown over the shoulders, so as to leave the hands and arms free to carry spear and buckler. The softness of the web, and the depth of the red border round the bottom of this convenient garb, indicate the social position of the wearer... Beneath the *shama* the aristocrat dons his silken, damask, or velvet *kamees*... Trowsers [sic] of the same material as the *shama* are worn by all, and also the cotton waistcloth, which is so long, that when wound round the waist, it serves the purpose of armour, in warding off blows, or in protecting from the thrust of sword or lance.<sup>138</sup>

Throughout his narrative, Stern often stresses the simplicity and basic functionality of the Ethiopian mode of dressing. In one instance, while crossing a river on the back of a mule, he realized how much more comfortable his travel companions were in their *shama* and quickly borrowed one from his friend, shedding his wet boots, stockings and trousers for the lightweight cotton fabric.<sup>139</sup>

Women’s clothing, accessories, and hair care, on the other hand, are described as having much more variation, particularly between social classes. However, Stern largely disregards these variations as women’s frivolity. Additionally, when discussing cases of men and women wearing imported *European* goods, Stern’s characterizations are rarely flattering. He states that women of means wear accessories to such an excess that their bodies are weighed down by the sheer mass of the “trinkets,” and he makes

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<sup>137</sup> The Amhara comprises only one of over seventy ethnic groups in Ethiopia, some with fewer than 10,000 members. The Amhara, Oromo and Tigray make up more than three quarters of the Ethiopian population, and political power has traditionally been held by the Amhara and Tigray.

<sup>138</sup> Stern, *Wanderings Among the Falashas*, 311-2.

<sup>139</sup> Stern, *Wanderings Among the Falashas*, 86. In one of the twenty illustrations in *Wanderings Among the Falashas in Abyssinia*, which were based on photographs taken during his missionary work, Stern is depicted preaching to the Falashas wearing a traditional Ethiopian *shama*, a long, hand-woven, cotton fabric worn wrapped around the body and over the shoulders.



the assumption that the objects that do not fall into his characterization of a simple and naïve culture are foreign and unnatural to the Ethiopian people. With regards to shoes, he claims that “a few stylish ladies and conceited priests may occasionally be seen to indulge in this extravagance; but then they appear so uncomfortable, and so piteously ill-at-ease, that one is almost inclined to regard them as penitents, who, to atone for certain sins, compress their toes in a clumsily-carved instrument of torture.”<sup>140</sup>

For the most part, Ethiopian clothing remained the same throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries [Figure 4.1]. Increased commerce brought materials and influences from foreign countries; however, most Ethiopian clothing continued to be a locally produced good that to some extent maintained the simplicity and functionality Stern encountered in the 1860s. The entire production process of growing cotton, spinning and weaving was all completed internally, so most Ethiopians had little to do with Europe in terms of clothing and the rapidly evolving “fashion system” in the Western sense.<sup>141</sup> During Emperor Tewodros’ time, there was an attempt to reform traditional modes of dressing the body. Probably influenced by contact with European travelers and missionaries, the emperor decreed that the practice of the “half-naked costume” was no longer acceptable and that all the people of the Ethiopian empire would be required to wear shirts and trousers. He criticized the old sumptuary laws as being, according to British Consul Walter Plowden, a “childish custom” that was no longer acceptable in his kingdom. However, at the same time, Emperor Tewodros contradicted his own orders by attempting to maintain hierarchical distinctions through clothing. In order to distinguish between his military

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<sup>140</sup> Stern, *Wanderings Among the Falashas*, 315.

<sup>141</sup> Pankhurst, *Social History*, 224.

officers and his regular subjects, the silk shirt would be only be worn by officers. Lesser subjects were limited to cotton.<sup>142</sup>

Although Tewodros' attempt at dress reform was largely unsuccessful, his criticism of sumptuary laws opened up the *possibility* of dressing in ways that did not necessarily denote social status, aside from military officials, which in the Ethiopian feudal system also indicated nobility. The primary reason for the ineffectiveness of the emperor's declaration can be attributed to the fact that the means to dress in different ways were quite simply not accessible to the lower classes. Additionally, though the nobility was regularly exposed to foreign styles of dressing and may have encountered the need for presenting the self in new ways, for farmers and peasants, who had very little contact with life beyond the daily needs of their own sustenance, incorporating new styles of dress were unnecessary and fairly pointless.

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<sup>142</sup> Walter C. Plowden, *Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla Country With an Account of a Mission to Ras Ali in 1848* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1868). See also Pankhurst, *Social History*, 331.



Figure 4.1: Typical dress of the Highland regions  
Margot Lubinski, Ethiopia, c. 1920  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

### *The Emperor's Clothes*

As opposed to the lower classes for whom the option of wearing different types of clothing was fairly unnecessary, Western styles of dress were quickly incorporated into the wardrobes of the royal family and other high-ranking government and military officials, primarily through attending Western institutions of learning, both in Ethiopia and abroad, or through travel and exposure to different modes of dress. For the emperor, the gradual inclusion of non-Ethiopian elements into his attire reflected the growing influence of Western styles, but at the same time, his rejection of fully submitting to European fashions demonstrates the self-conscious nature of his decisions regarding his physical appearance. Photographs of the emperor reveal the importance he placed upon dressing the body and presenting a suitable social body.

Much like his decision to address the League of Nations in 1936 in Amharic rather than in French—the League's working language and a language that the emperor was fluent in—Haile Selassie made conscious decisions with regards to his dress throughout his long reign. In "Haile Sellassie: Leadership and Statesmanship," John Spencer notes that after he assumed the throne in 1930, Haile Selassie immersed his personality into the emperorship by making himself into an aloof and distant symbol, surrounded by all the pageantry of ceremony. For the emperor, the form, not the substance, was imperative.<sup>143</sup> Even his posture became straight and stiff, particularly when seated on the throne, and he "packaged himself as an emperor."<sup>144</sup>

At the time of the emperor's coronation, public information about the emperor and access to him was quite limited. State-run newspapers (the only form of mass media available at the time) commented favorably about Haile Selassie's initiatives in education and praised him for overseeing the activities of the schools in Addis Ababa

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<sup>143</sup> John H. Spencer, "Haile Sellassie: Leadership and Statesmanship," *Ethiopianist Notes* 2:1 (1978), 29-31.

<sup>144</sup> Marcus, *Haile Selassie I*, 97.

himself. Aside from a handful of official portraits of the emperor that were reprinted in newspapers, the image of the emperor had not yet entered into the daily visual repertoire of the Ethiopian people, nor had the international (Western) media made “Emperor Haile Selassie” into a household name. However, well aware of Ethiopia’s historical isolation and the lack of foreign participation at dynastic events, Haile Selassie had his heart set on a royal representation at his coronation. He wrote in his autobiography:

But now that Ethiopia had concluded treaties of commerce and friendship with twelve foreign governments, had entered the League of Nations, and had established firm friendly relations, We were convinced that it was proper—in accordance with the practice of the most civilized governments in the case of their coronations—to invite to Our coronation the countries which had set up legations and consulates in Ethiopia.<sup>145</sup>

The emperor postponed the coronation ceremony for seven months in order to prepare Addis Ababa as well as himself for display. During this time, the urban landscape changed drastically: “arrangements were made for the principle streets of Addis Ababa and the houses along each street to be repaired as well as for electric light to be installed along the main streets and in all the houses by which the guests would pass.”<sup>146</sup> Buildings were painted; beggars and lepers were banned from the capital; triumphal arches were erected; the streets were paved, and electric lines were laid. On the city streets, eight newly purchased Austrian horses practiced their task of pulling the recently acquired ceremonial coach, which had once belonged to the ex-emperor of Germany.

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<sup>145</sup> Haile Selassie I, *Autobiography*, 172.

<sup>146</sup> Haile Selassie I, *Autobiography*, 174.

In addition, the emperor oversaw the design of new imperial robes for the entire royal family, and the crown and the orb, the imperial scepter, the sword and the ring were all recreated with gold, diamonds and pearls. The ceremonial dress of the *rases* (kings) and *dejazmatches* (military commanders) were redesigned with rich velvet and gold embroidery to match the new headdresses made of lions' manes. Though these new robes and imperial accessories maintained the symbols and motifs of Ethiopian styles, the emperor made a self-conscious decision to incorporate styles that were associated with European majesty, or what Haile Selassie alludes to as the traditions of the "most civilized governments." In time for the world's visit to Ethiopia, the city's police and Imperial Guard were outfitted in new khaki uniforms with black, knee-length boots and hats to match brought from Belgium [see second person from the left in Figure 5.1].<sup>147</sup> As foreign dignitaries began to arrive in Addis Ababa, reporters and tourists also streamed into the city, and Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, the King of Kings, became a household name in Europe and the U.S. overnight.<sup>148</sup>

By this time, photography had well established itself in Ethiopia's capital city. Portrait studios were prevalent along Addis Ababa's commercial streets, and photographs were no longer limited to portraits of high-officials or souvenir images of Africans taken by European visitors. However, Haile Selassie largely limited the circulation of his images to formal portraits in full imperial dress or posed photographs from official state functions. From the time that he assumed the throne in 1930 to when he fled the capital in 1936, photographic images of the emperor rarely depicted spontaneous, candid moments. Even if these images existed, it is highly unlikely that the general public had access to them. Prior to the Italian invasion, the emperor's

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<sup>147</sup> Marcus, *Haile Sellassie I*, 109-10.

<sup>148</sup> The coronation was held on 2 November 1930. *Time Magazine* ran the story of Haile Selassie's coronation in the issue released just one day later, dated 3 November 1930.

public persona was meticulously crafted, but simultaneously restricted, which to a certain extent, helped perpetuate the enigma of the emperor to his own people.



Figure 4.2: Emperor Haile Selassie outside his home in England during his period of exile with *Hakim* Workenah, Princess Tsehai, and Crown Prince Asfa Wosen  
Photographer Unknown, England, c. 1936  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

During his time in England, however, the emperor was regularly photographed wearing significantly more casual clothing. He frequently wore dark Western slacks and leather loafers with a *shama* wrapped around his torso, topped with the embroidered cloak that became somewhat of a trademark for the emperor while he resided in Bath [Figure 4.2]. When seen or photographed with others dressed in three-piece suits, the emperor's dark cloak set him apart from the people around him. Still, Haile Selassie was not merely attempting to look different or to stand out in a crowd



when he chose to wear clothes that were more Ethiopian than European in style. His decision to address the League of Nations in Amharic and to dress in Ethiopian fashions were an assertion of his, and thus, his country's position that the emperor felt needed to be made at the time. He was struggling for the recognition of Ethiopia's autonomy, and in representing himself as an embodiment of Ethiopian culture, pride and authority, he sought to preserve certain aspects of the self that were distinct, but not so different that the Western contingent would summarily disregard the Ethiopian cause.

In his speech before the League of Nations, Haile Selassie appealed to a universal sense of humanity, comparing his country to the smaller countries in the League that may someday need the help and protection of larger, more powerful countries like France and Britain to fight off aggressors like the Italians. He called upon their shared belief in God as Christians, and at the same time, he distinguished the Ethiopian struggle by describing the Italian invasion of an independent nation as a “barbaric” and “unprecedented” act.<sup>149</sup> The emperor similarly created a balance with the notion of sameness and difference in his appearance. Though the cloak he wore was enough to distinguish him as different—the traditional high collar had been altered slightly to reflect a more modern style suggestive of the collar on tailored shirts—he also chose to wear dark trousers and leather shoes that were consistent with European fashions of the times [Figure 4.3].

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<sup>149</sup> Though the speech may not have been “successful” in terms of convincing the League of Nations to provide Ethiopia with the necessary support, this address immediately became international news. Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia became a household name, and as previously discussed, the significance and impact of his speech led to his being chosen as *Time Magazine*'s “Man of the Year” in 1930.





Figure 4.3: Emperor Haile Selassie and Crown Prince Asfa Wosen  
with two unknown persons  
Photographer Unknown, England, c. 1938  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

This careful balancing act between sameness and difference in his physical appearance was a central aspect of his success at the international level, and it was one that the emperor played well throughout his long reign. I will return to the emperor's careful play between the opposing forces later in this chapter with regards to images of the emperor that dominated the Western media.

In addition to referencing Ethiopian dress, Haile Selassie's choice in clothing also relied on historically Western visual signifiers embedded in clothing. Although

the traditional cloak before the emperor made any changes to it at the time of his coronation was similar to capes worn by European royalty, they were much more restrictive than practical. The traditional cloak covered the arms and hands, preventing the wearer from moving freely or carrying large objects, a significant departure from the practicality of the *shama* that Stern reported in *Wanderings Among the Falashas in Abyssinia*. The dark cloak that Haile Selassie so often wore in England was shortened as well as widened, allowing greater movement from under the fabric. However, the simplified and more functional garment continued to serve its function as a vestment, broadening the emperor's slight build, particularly in photographs. In Figure 4.3, Haile Selassie's frame appears significantly larger than the three other people pictured with him.

Because of the basic necessity of having to acquire Western support and recognition of Ethiopia as an autonomous nation, Haile Selassie's international victory and return to Ethiopia also marked a significant change in clothing. Prior to the Italian invasion, the emperor's public outfit of choice consisted of a tan colored military uniform with a long cloak, also suggestive of the traditional cloak but without any embellishments. He had obviously already incorporated Western styles of clothing into his wardrobe *before* spending five years in England; thus, his choice of attire during his time in exile was a conscious decision that asserted his cultural and national identity as an Ethiopian. Upon his return to Ethiopia, the emperor's style became much more aligned with Western fashions. He regularly wore both Western and Ethiopian styles, but it became increasingly common over the years for the emperor to dress in dark, three-piece suits or Western-style military uniforms *without* the cloak. Full traditional regalia gradually became limited to religious or ceremonial occasions.



Figure 4.4: Emperor Haile Selassie I  
Torkom “Tony” Boyadjian, Ethiopia, 1955  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

This shift in the emperor's appearance can be understood in relation to how he situated himself as a proponent of modernization in Ethiopia. Once he had established himself and his country as viable participants in the international arena, it was no longer as important for him to assert his cultural identity and authority to foreign countries. Emperor Haile Selassie had ensured that Ethiopia was a global citizen, a member of the United Nations and other worldwide organizations, and a participant in important international meetings in Asia and Africa. His travels to Europe and the Americas as well as throughout Africa had introduced the outside world to Ethiopia's culture and civilization, strengthened the country's sovereignty, and helped to win back Eritrea and its vital access to the Red Sea.<sup>150</sup> His focus turned to presenting to the people of Ethiopia the benefits and ideals of modernity. Official portraits of the emperor that were released to the media reflected his vision of modernization through his visual presentation of self, not only through the ways in which he dressed his body, but also through how he situates himself in relation to the props used in various portraits as well as to the camera itself, and in turn to the viewers of the image.

In the photograph by Tony Boyadjian from 1955 [Figure 4.4], the emperor is dressed in the formal dress uniform of high military officials, himself, of course, being the highest. His jacket is crammed with numerous medals, ribbons, tassels and embroidery that only seem less overwhelming because the photograph is in black and white.<sup>151</sup> The clothes themselves do not signify any overt connections with Ethiopian modes of dressing. The jacket and trousers are very Western in style, and from the silk drapery in the background to the ornate velvet throne as well as the decorative sword

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<sup>150</sup> Harold G. Marcus, "1960, the Year the Sky Began Falling on Haile Sellassie," *Northeast African Studies*, 6:3 (1999) 19.

<sup>151</sup> A color version of the same photograph also exists. The color image is overwhelmed by the bright, highly saturated colors of the emperor's clothing and the rich, velvet throne in the background.



the emperor holds in his hands, there are numerous references to Western aristocracy. However, there are also elements of Ethiopian aesthetics that have been incorporated into the designs of the clothing as well as the props in the image. The gold embroidery along the collar and the sleeves of the jacket are identical to the design that adorns the cloak the emperor wears in the photograph on the cover of the coronation issue of *Time Magazine* from 1930 [Figure 4.8]. In addition to the embroidered jacket, both the headdress on the side table to the left and the emperor's throne incorporate elements significant within Ethiopian culture. The central feature of the headdress is the hair from a lion's mane, which was an important part of the Ethiopian warrior's traditional dress, and the throne features the head and feet of a lion along the sides as well as a crown on the top of the throne that reflects the aesthetics of the traditional emperor's crown before it was redesigned to emulate the crowns of Western monarchs.

Portraits of the emperor, like Figure 4.4, that were released to the general public and seen in newspapers and magazines tended to present him as a person who was inaccessible. He rarely looked directly into the camera, and his manner and pose alluded to a man who was larger than life. In this photograph, the height of the side table helps distort the emperor's size. With long legs, the table appears to be quite tall, but it only reaches slightly above Haile Selassie's knees. On the other hand, the large throne fills much of the picture space, and the height of the seat cushions would require the emperor to climb into his throne. However, the careful placement of the pillow under the throne effectively minimizes the height of the throne by filling the empty space and providing the illusion that the bottom half of the throne is shorter than it actually is.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> According to legend, the emperor's small stature prevented his feet from reaching the floor when he was seated in a large chair or throne. Not wanting his feet to dangle over the edge of a chair, he had one of his servants carry around a cushion to place under his feet at all times. Although there is no evidence to prove the validity of this story, there are numerous photographs of the emperor seated at a throne with a velvet cushion under his feet.

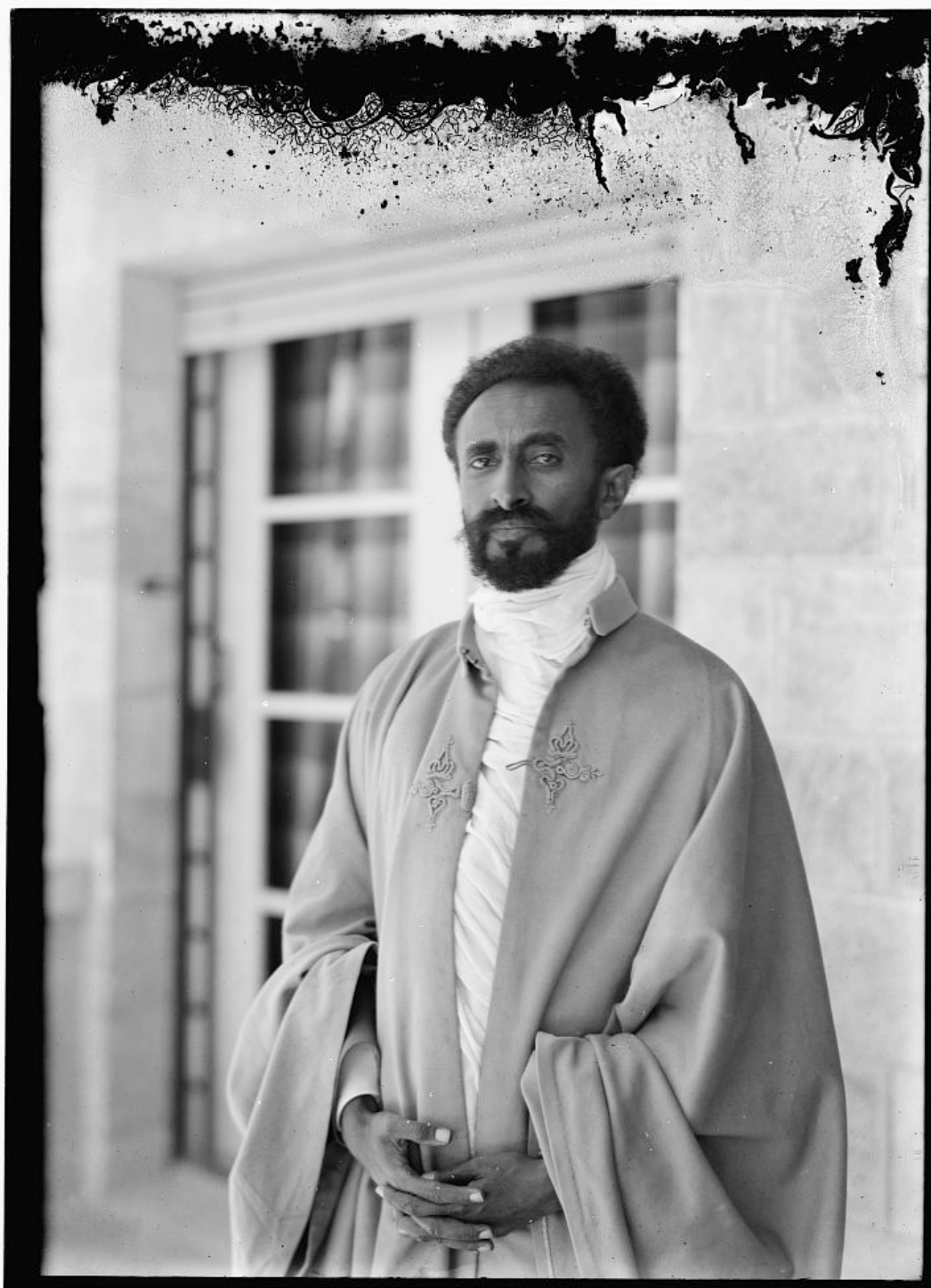


Figure 4.5: Emperor Haile Selassie I  
Matson Photo Service, Jerusalem, c. 1936  
Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, [LC-M32-52465-x]

As opposed to a portrait of the emperor from 1936 [Figure 4.5], the increased formality of his self-presentation as well as the embodiment of his monarchical role is apparent in the portrait from approximately twenty years later by Tony Boyadjian. Although in the earlier portrait, the emperor maintains a sense of majesty and dignity, the image in Figure 4.5 is much more casual in presentation and style.<sup>153</sup> The emperor meets his viewer's gaze with a slightly raised eyebrow as if in mid-conversation. The outdoor setting and the relaxed manner in which he holds his hands together in front of him give the impression that he stopped for a photograph while outside for an afternoon stroll in the gardens. As impressive as the dark cloak the emperor was so often seen in is, the soft color and gentle folds of this cloak accentuate his dark hair and beard as well as soften the contrast between him and his environment. His presence is not as imposing, and in this image, the emperor of Ethiopia appears to be approachable.

Portraits of Empress Menen likewise reveal the same play between Ethiopian styles of clothing and Western influences. The empress increasingly dressed and presented herself according to a Western, *royal* paradigm, but the style of her clothing maintained elements of Ethiopian aesthetics [Figure 4.6 and 4.7]. The gown that she wears in Figure 4.6 is styled after European women's ball gowns with delicately embroidered flowers on a satin-like material. The empress's tiara reflects the style worn by European royalty rather than the larger, cylindrically shaped crowns worn by former women of Ethiopia's royal court. Similar to Haile Selassie's portrait, the

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<sup>153</sup> According to documentation at the Library of Congress, this photograph is tentatively dated 1923. This is highly unlikely given Haile Selassie's approximate age in the photograph, and the fact that this series of photographs also includes images of Crown Prince Asfa Wosen, Prince Makonnen and Princess Tsehai [Figure 1] standing at the same location. Their approximate ages as well as the location of the photographs dates them as being taken in May of 1936. The royal family, after fleeing Addis Ababa, had traveled to Jerusalem where they stayed for approximately 2 weeks before departing for London.

Empress Menen looks off into the distance, avoiding direct contact with her viewers. On the other hand, the empress incorporates a shawl draped loosely around her arms into the outfit. In traditional women's dress, the *netela*, a cloth used to cover the head and shoulders, is a necessary element of social and religious attire, without which a woman is considered to be dressed inappropriately.<sup>154</sup>

However, the most interesting aspect of this portrait is in what it does not depict rather than what is actually in the image. In Figure 4.7, an image dating approximately 20 years prior, the camera captures an important signifier of feminine beauty in Ethiopian culture—rings of tattoos on the empress's neck. These tattoos were seen much more frequently in early photographs of the empress, but were gradually covered up with scarves and clothes with high collars. Finally, in later years, the tattoos were either concealed with make-up prior to the photograph being taken or were erased by the photographer during development (though the photographer certainly would not have taken the liberty to do so on his own initiative). In Figure 4.6, it is also possible that the tattoos had simply faded over time as it was taken two decades later, but as numerous other photographs of the empress indicate, she frequently hid them from view in both formal and informal photographs.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Religious etiquette requires women to have their heads covered at church and other religious ceremonies. Traditionally, the *netela*, made of white cotton, was a basic requirement for women's clothing, but today, women attend religious functions wearing a variety of scarves and shawls of a range of colors and styles.

<sup>155</sup> Of the thousands of photographs of Empress Menen at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, there are only a handful of images that reveal the tattoos in the first place. The photograph in Figure 4.7 is the only available photograph I found during my research that shows the tattoos clearly enough to distinguish them as such.





Figure 4.6: Empress Menen  
Torkom “Tony” Boyadjian, Ethiopia, c. 1958  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University



Figure 4.7: Empress Menen  
Photographer Unknown, England, c. 1937  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

The portrait of the empress in Figure 4.7 is a much more candid image than official portraits that were taken for publicity purposes. Because of the empress's approximate age, the photograph was likely taken during the family's period of exile in England. The empress, like Haile Selassie in Figure 4.5, is dressed in a more traditional style, and the photograph appears to have been taken in a studio setting,



which was unlikely after their return to Ethiopia. The royal court photographers typically took formal portraits of the royal family at their residences, most likely as a way of incorporating background and props associated with the monarchy (i.e., imperial thrones, grand marble fireplaces, leather sofas, etc.) Aside from being taken in a studio, the empress's pose is much more casual in this portrait. Her gentle gaze and the trace of a smile on her face are also characteristics that were not typical of formal portraits of the royal family upon their return to Ethiopia following the Italian invasion.

However, the difference in style and composition of the emperor and empress's physical appearances from the 1930s to the 1950s has more to do with audience than the passage of time. The image in Figure 4.5 was taken in Jerusalem for a photography service that would distribute the image to news agencies around the world. The intended audience for this photograph was not Ethiopian, thus the emperor's agenda was markedly different. Rather than focusing on the majesty of the throne or the physical embodiment of modernity, photographs of Haile Selassie in the Western media depicted a much simpler style that often called attention to the emperor as a man rather than royalty.

In November 1930, Haile Selassie was featured on the cover of America's *Time Magazine* [Figure 4.8] as "the King of Kings, the Conquering Lion of Judah, and the Elect of God...Emperor of Ethiopia."<sup>156</sup> His appearance in the cover image minimizes the pomp and circumstance of the royal court, despite the fact that the emperor's coronation, which was the impetus behind this article, was a feast of lavish ceremony and extravagance. Yet, in this image, he appears more accessible and in a

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<sup>156</sup> "Coronation," *Time Magazine*, 3 November 1930, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171882370.html> (accessed 10 July 2007).

FIFTEEN CENTS

November 3, 1930

# TIME

*The Weekly Newsmagazine*



*International*

Volume XVI

## "THE KING OF KINGS"

*Crowns worth \$2,000,000, Hindenburg's wine, George's cake, Wilhelm's coach,  
Franz Josef's coachman, Hoover's photograph. . . .*  
(See FOREIGN NEWS)

Number 18

Circulation Office, 350 East 22nd Street, Chicago.

(Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.)

Editorial and Advertising Offices, 205 East 22nd Street, New York.

Figure 4.8: Emperor Haile Selassie I  
*Time Magazine*, 1930

way, more human. The accompanying feature article contains the names and titles of the distinguished guests who attended the coronation as well as a long list of exorbitant gifts that were sent in congratulations to the emperor. In many ways, the tone of the article reflects the formal ceremony that would be bestowed upon European royalty, and this basis of American interest (or so it seems according to this article) lies not in the *position* of being the emperor of Ethiopia, but rather in the *image* of being so. In the closing paragraph, the writer states:

Certainly the new Emperor is the greatest Abyssinian ruler of modern times. Grandeur and a fine sensitiveness are blended in his person. He is educating likely Abyssinian youths at schools and colleges throughout the world, but particularly in the U.S. His way with the priestly and feudal classes, bitter foes of modernization, can only be called masterly. Little by little, as he can, he is introducing farm machinery, building roads, waking up a land which has slept for 5,000 years.<sup>157</sup>

However, what makes this image so interesting is the fact that in just five short years, Haile Selassie appears once again on the cover of *Time Magazine*, this time as *Time*'s "Man of the Year," and his status seems to fall from that of a majestic and kind African ruler with grand visions of modernizing his country to that of a tired, yet cunning man who has been "stuck" with the task of trying to civilize a land of savages. Although he is named "Man of the Year" and described as being "the noblest Ethiopian of them all," the emperor is simultaneously cast as a man of far greater intellect and diplomacy than is possible for black Africans, thus the insistence on characterizing him as having Semitic features and "elongated" eyes that can see far more than his "turbulent subjects."<sup>158</sup> In other words, the foundation of his intelligence and prosperity could not possibly come from the African race.

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<sup>157</sup> "Coronation."

<sup>158</sup> "Person of the Year," *Time Magazine*, 6 January 1936, <http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/person>

In terms of his political position, the article describes the Ethiopian emperor as not being understood and properly respected by his countrymen, people with whom he really had no affiliation because his royal ancestry essentially made him different—he was unlike his subjects in every way. Additionally, the article fully misrepresents Ethiopian history, insisting that contrary to popular belief, Ethiopia was not a Christian country; the Ethiopian “Empire” did not exist prior to Haile Selassie; the legend of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba had been entirely disproved by recent British scholarship.

Characterizing this “Man of the Year” in such contradictory ways, Haile Selassie is made into a caricature of sorts, a powerful and cunning man who “tricks” Europeans into supporting his agendas, who grudgingly rules over a group of uncivilized Africans that are barely intelligent enough to recognize their own emperor, whose entirely altruistic and charitable works for his people goes unrecognized by those who benefit the most. In other words, he is situated within the context of colonialism as the good father protecting his feeble-minded children who are incapable of knowing what is good for them.

As revealing as the articles are of American sentiments regarding the Ethiopian emperor, the portrait images of Haile Selassie found on the covers of the respective issues further indicate the careful visual construction of the emperor’s public image by the American media [Figure 4.8 and 4.9]. On the cover of the coronation issue [Figure 4.8], the emperor looks directly into the camera, thus straight into the eyes of his viewers. His hair and beard are well groomed, and the velvet cloak with intricately embroidered edges is impeccable. Though the bottom of the emblem he wears over his heart is cut off in the photograph, it is easily recognizable as the Star of David.

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[oftheyear/archive/stories/1935.html](http://oftheyear/archive/stories/1935.html) (accessed 10 July 2007).



FIFTEEN CENTS

January 6, 1936

# TIME

*The Weekly Newsmagazine*



Portrait for TIME by Jerry Farnsworth

Volume XXVII

MAN OF THE YEAR

"... subject to negotiation."  
(See FOREIGN NEWS)

Number 1

Circulation Office, 330 East 42nd Street, Chicago.

(Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.)

Editorial and Advertising Offices, 122 East 42nd Street, New York.

Figure 4.9: Emperor Haile Selassie I  
Jerry Farnsworth, *Time Magazine*, 1936

The plain white background and the brightness of the lighting give both an air of straightforwardness and elegance to the photograph as well as to the 38-year old emperor. There is little more in this image than the man himself, and the simplicity of the photograph provides affirmation of his authoritative position without allowing a sense of royalty or majesty to overwhelm his identity. Styled much like a photograph used for identification purposes, this image of Haile Selassie functions modestly as evidence of who he is.

On the other hand, in five years, the emperor appears to have aged several decades. The image on the cover of the “Man of the Year” issue [Figure 4.9] is a painted portrait rather than a photographic one, a simple gesture that alludes to something that is beyond the African tradition. As a painting, this portrait situates the Ethiopian emperor within a Western tradition of representation as well as a Western mode of viewing, much like what the accompanying article attempts to portray—a ruler who is much too *white* to be like his black subjects. This fact is also suggested in the sheer brightness of his photographic portrait of 1930, but the black and white photograph cannot hide the texture of his hair. In the painted portrait, his hair appears to have soft, rolling waves, and both his hair and beard are longer, containing hints of gray. His cheeks seem to have hollowed out, and his eyes, directed away from the camera, also reflect the passing of years as if the knowledge he has gained and the trials he has faced as the ruler of a difficult and unruly people have exhausted him. The deep purple of the drapery in the background and the combination of royal blue and gold assign the emperors with colors that are typically associated with *European* royalty. The complex gold embroidery on his jacket makes the gold cross around his neck and the emblem on his chest difficult to distinguish. Although this artist rendition accurately depicts the angularity of Haile Selassie’s face, the emperor’s slight build



has been expanded to fill the picture frame, suggesting the Western ideal of a strong and powerful man.

What has essentially been erased from Haile Selassie's person in the second portrait is any sense of *difference*. The elements that distinguished him as an African ruler have disappeared—the realism of the photograph, the relative simplicity of his “royal” clothing, the directness of his gaze, and the *evidence* of his existence. These have been replaced with what the emperor should have looked like if he was not an *African*. Removing his African-ness made it easier for the foreign (Western) public to reconcile the magnitude of his actions at the League of Nations and the eventual outcome that led to his designation as *Time Magazine*'s “Man of the Year.”

One of the most important issues that surrounds African photography as a field of inquiry is that of subjectivity and the agency of the photographed person. As a visual tradition that developed within a colonial system, the erasure of subjectivity in photographs of Africans by Europeans has been a central concern. However, in the case of Haile Selassie, the problem of subjectivity and objectivity comes to light in a painted portrait rather than a photographic one. Despite the photographer's power to manipulate an image through elements such as lighting, focus, and exposure, the photograph was dictated by how the emperor chose to present himself, be it through clothing, posture or facial expression. Additionally, this particular image on the cover of the coronation issue is likely to have been provided by the Ethiopian government for publication in the American media. On the other hand, the painted portrait on the cover of *Time Magazine* is much more likely to have disregarded the emperor's opinion in how he was presented to the American public.

These often grossly inaccurate depictions in the Western media of who Emperor Haile Selassie *really* was are significant to how he understood his own position in the international arena as well as to how he was perceived by his own

people. Haile Selassie was acutely aware of the racist policies and double standards placed upon him, regardless of his country's membership in the League of Nations. With the steady growth of his international influence and the energy and spirit of revolution that came in the 1950s and 1960s with the Black Rights Movement, Haile Selassie's international public image remained focused on the struggle against prejudice and racism. In a speech delivered at the United Nations General Assembly in New York City on October 4, 1963, the Ethiopian emperor stated:

...that until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned; that until there are no longer first and second class citizens of any nation; that until the color of a man's skin is of no more significance than the color of his eyes; that until the basic human rights are guaranteed to all without regard to race; until that day, the dream of everlasting peace and world citizenship and the rule of international morality will remain but fleeting illusions to be pursued but never attained...until all Africans stand as speak as free beings, equal in the eyes of all men as they are in the eyes of Heaven; until that day, the African continent will not know peace.<sup>159</sup>

In addition to inspiring African Diaspora communities around the world in the struggle for equality, Haile Selassie held an esteemed position in the Pan-African Movement, founding the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and supporting the fight for independence from colonialism.

As a public figure in the international spotlight who was photographed and filmed everywhere he went, Emperor Haile Selassie was as equally concerned with his personal image as he was with speaking out against racism. According to his autobiography, it is clear that this meticulous crafting of his public persona was a skill

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<sup>159</sup> Published in *Important Utterances of H.I.M.* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Imperial Ethiopian Ministry of Information, 1972). Part of this legendary speech was turned into the song "War" by Bob Marley in 1976. In 1996, musician and producer Bruno Blum re-recorded the song, dubbing Haile Selassie's actual UN speech over the music.

that he garnered at a young age as a child of royal ancestry and the heir of a military ruler, *Ras Makonnen*.<sup>160</sup> His daily observations of his father's governing, administering, and judging together with the formal education he had received in a Capuchin school run by the French, Haile Selassie was familiar with the austerity and seriousness of the task of governance.<sup>161</sup> Throughout his reign, the emperor was a cautious man, rarely acting spontaneously and seldom making immediate judgments, a trait that is not only apparent in his autobiography, but also in the highly criticized and academically discredited biography by Ryszard Kapuscinski, *The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat* (1983).<sup>162</sup> Of the countless photographs that exist of the emperor, including formal portraits, news and government propaganda images, and even informal family snapshots, casual or intimate moments of Haile Selassie's personal life were not often captured.

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<sup>160</sup> Haile Selassie's father, *Ras Makonnen*, is often described as Ethiopia's true advocate for modernization. *Ras Makonnen* played an important role in imposing imperial rule over eastern Ethiopia and was named governor of Harerge province, which provided much of the empire's commerce to and from the Gulf of Aden ports. Historian Harold G. Marcus describes the *ras* as being:

by nature open to innovation and new ideas, [and he] entered into contact with Europeans and other foreigners who increasingly came to Harar...to profit from Ethiopia's economic consolidation under Menelik. They found the governor an intelligent man with an attractive personality, good looks, and the exquisite politeness characteristic of the Ethiopian aristocracy. He impressed them with his desire to learn about the outside world, and his many questions elicited as much accurate information as could be expected from his largely untutored interlocutors...The *ras* soon became Ethiopia's leading Europeanist, a status Menelik recognized in 1890 when he sent Makonnen to Rome to negotiate an important treaty.

See Harold G. Marcus, *Haile Selassie I: The Formative Years, 1892-1936* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), ix-xiii, 2-6.

<sup>161</sup> Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia, *The Autobiography of Emperor Haile Selassie I, 1892-1937*, trans. Edward Ullendorff (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>162</sup> Kapuscinski, a Polish author, wrote the book at a time when Poland was experiencing its own socio-political upheaval with the dictator Edward Gierek. Many who read *The Emperor* when it was first published in Poland in 1978 believed it to be an allegorical tale about the Polish condition. However, what is most problematic with this piece of "non-fiction" is that it claims to be the "real" story of Haile Selassie's last years as emperor as told by the people who encountered him on a daily basis—members of his staff, servants and chauffeurs. For more on this topic, see Harold G. Marcus, "Prejudice and Ignorance in Reviewing Books About Africa: The Strange Case of Ryszard Kapuscinski's 'The Emperor'," *History in Africa*, 17 (1990) 373-8.

An important element of the emperor's public image was his appearance. The fact that the emperor was slight in build and described as having "delicate" features worked to his advantage in certain situations such as the Western perception and perhaps justification of his not *really* being a black African. However, for the emperor, who wanted to project an image of power and prestige, his self-awareness of his stature led him to place a great deal of care on his appearance. As he navigated his diplomatic relationships with the leaders of foreign countries, his clothing increasingly reflected an international sense of regality and authority. Whenever he was seen in public, either in person or on film, Emperor Haile Selassie was conscious of how he presented himself to others. Through his personal attire, he portrayed the image of a man who was comfortable in a range of social situations, from making state visits to countries around the world to visiting schools and attending groundbreaking ceremonies in his own country.

For the emperor as well as the empress, the meaning and function of portraits changed significantly over time. These images went from representing the likeness of unique individuals who needed to be projected as people with hopes, dreams, and emotions like everyone else to symbolic embodiments of the grandeur of the monarchy and the ideals of modernity. Much of this was accomplished through the clothes they wore—from beautiful and somewhat "exotic" to the foreign eye to a re-appropriation of European signifiers embedded in clothing. However, in their "performance" before the camera, the royal family continually re-defined their role within the international arena as well as their position as monarchs in Ethiopia. Through portraits of Haile Selassie, it is apparent that this performance of self was an important aspect of his public persona throughout his lifetime. On 14 December 1960, following an attempted coup, which resulted in the deaths of 15 of his most trusted and experienced officials, along with hundreds of soldiers, bodyguards and civilians

who also perished in the fighting, the emperor emerged from his plane in Asmara “looking somewhat tired [but] relaxed and self-assured.” According to the U.S. Ambassador at the time, Haile Selassie appeared “calm and collected, his usual air.”<sup>163</sup>

In the countless reports and descriptions of the enigmatic emperor, whether by reporters, both foreign and domestic, ambassadors writing reports, or historians reconstructing his life, descriptions of Haile Selassie’s physical features are limited to comments on his “diminutive figure” and his “delicate features.” Christopher Clapham writes that:

...the Emperor dominates the group, not physically but through the bonds of deference which draws the other to him...his domination of the last half-century shows that his delicate features and great personal charm conceal a politician of the greatest skill.<sup>164</sup>

Haile Selassie’s small stature is often discussed in terms of an obstacle that he has overcome through his powerful charisma and intelligence. Even in discussions of the “image” that the emperor portrayed to his subjects, there is little consideration for how the emperor was active in shaping the visual representation of his person:

Ethiopian emperors have always been surrounded by a mystical aura bordering on the supernatural. There is a strong element of dread mixed in the profound reverence accorded to their emperor by the Ethiopians. Despite the constant exposure of his person to his subjects, Haile Selassie has preserved an aura of awe-inspired mystery which, instead of dissolving, thickens with the passage of years, and has turned the aging monarch into a legend during his own lifetime. Perpetually frozen unto a posture of haughty regal isolation, the somber figure of the ruler stands across a psychological divide which even his most trusted retainers cannot cross. Seen in the midst of his tense, scurrying courtiers, the diminutive Emperor gives the impression of remote aloofness and icy calmness that easily dominate any scene of which he

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<sup>163</sup> U.S. Ambassador Arthur L. Richards, quoted in Marcus, “1960, the Year,” 15-6.

<sup>164</sup> Christopher Clapham, “Feudalism, Modernization and the Ethiopian Monarchy,” *Conference on Ethiopian Feudalism* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 1976) 47.

is part. Men of great importance in their own right are reduced to insignificance in the Emperor's presence, and sophisticated Ethiopians who have no illusions concerning their ruler's human and political shortcomings confess to become awe-struck before him. Significantly, after more than fifty years of rule, Haile Selassie remains a mystery to his subjects. Little is ever known about his thoughts, and apparently are shared with no one. Rumors about the Emperor's role, motivation and interest on decisions abound, but facts about such matters are precious few.<sup>165</sup>

This "mystery" that enshrouds the emperor is likewise apparent in the numerous photographic portraits of the man that were printed in newspapers and magazines throughout his lifetime. Despite frequently appearing in public, photographic representations of Haile Selassie were the primary means by which Ethiopians encountered the emperor on a continuous and daily basis, projecting the image of an empire rather than a man. In the presentation of his body, portraits of Haile Selassie embodied the ideals of modernity and empire; thus, in many ways, the emperor's body served as a symbol rather than a representation of self. Though his "uses" of clothing were significant and certainly served as a means of indicating a personal relationship with modernity, the politics of fashion and *embodiment* became much more significant with the next generation of Ethiopian royalty.

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<sup>165</sup> John Markakis and Nega Ayele, *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1978) 208.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Next Generation

If the emperor used clothing as a means of representing his authority as well as his political agendas at home and abroad, then his children were instrumental in garnering a sense of “fashionability” among a younger generation of Ethiopians. Though the emperor was quite self-aware of the image that he projected to various groups of people through his choice in clothing, photographs of the emperor’s children indicate that they, particularly his sons, were instrumental in providing the Ethiopian public with the basis for understanding clothing as a means of negotiating the new, modern social environment. The emperor’s children regularly wore clothing either from or influenced by the West beginning at an early age. When Tafari Makonnen was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia, he had five children with his wife, Empress Menen.<sup>166</sup> The eldest, Princess Tenange Worke<sup>167</sup> was eighteen at the time, and the youngest, Prince Makonnen was only seven. Haile Selassie’s two sons, Crown Prince Asfa Wosen and Prince Makonnen, were bestowed with various responsibilities at an early age and were both active throughout their teenage years in receiving foreign dignitaries and accompanying their father on official state functions.

Although as children, they had long since been attending schools run by European teachers and were regularly photographed in trousers, suspenders, button-down shirts and blazers, the princes were almost exclusively dressed in traditional, formal robes when working in their official capacities, particularly when these events occurred in Ethiopia. Figure 5.1 shows the Crown Prince Asfa Wosen receiving

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<sup>166</sup> The emperor’s youngest son, Prince Sahle Selassie, was born into his princely title in 1931, a year after Haile Selassie’s coronation.

<sup>167</sup> Alternate spellings: Tenangework, Tanagna Warq

foreign dignitaries at Addis Ababa's train station wearing traditional men's attire (third visible person from the right). Other high-ranking officials of the Ethiopian court seen in the image are also dressed in their newly fashioned traditional robes. (Additionally, this photograph shows Bedros Boyadjian and his son Haigaz, the royal court photographers, on the far left. Bedros is behind the camera, and Haigaz stands to his left.) This image depicts a style that Asfa Wosen is not often seen wearing after his family's return from exile, partly because dressing in traditional clothes no longer seemed imperative to the emperor's agenda, but also because Asfa Wosen and his siblings became increasingly "comfortable" in stylish European fashions.



Figure 5.1: Crown Prince Asfa Wosen receiving foreign delegation  
for the emperor's coronation

Photographer unknown, Ethiopia, 1 November 1930

Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University



In the images from the family's time in England [Figures 4.2 and 4.3], the crown prince wears very fashionable three-piece suits, and as time goes on, his familiarity and comfort with Western modes of dressing becomes increasingly apparent. He begins to comb his hair differently, and the somewhat gangly and thin young man begins to fill out his clothes. In Figures 4.2 and 4.3, taken approximately two years apart, there is a marked difference in the manner in which the formal, three-piece suit is worn on his body. Although he is posing in Figure 4.3, his body appears to be much more relaxed than in Figure 4.2, a more spontaneous photograph. The change in his hairstyle additionally reflects his embodiment of English fashions from the 1930s.

Upon the royal family's return to Ethiopia, Asfa Wosen and his siblings as well as their spouses were significantly more reflective of the changing fashion sensibility in urban Ethiopian culture than the emperor and empress. Perhaps as often as the emperor himself, the crown prince and Princess Medferiash Worke,<sup>168</sup> Prince Makonnen and Princess Sara Gizaw, and Princess Tenange Worke were seen in public and photographed for the media during the 1950s and 1960s. They depicted not only a change in styles of dressing, but also a sense of modern fashionability through an *embodiment* of their clothing.

The emperor's children were central figures within the mass media both in Ethiopia and abroad. They spent a considerable amount of time in Europe where many of their children were born and where they were not held to many of the strict cultural customs of Ethiopian society, particularly those imposed upon young women. The younger generation of Ethiopian royalty came to signify the lifestyles of the rich, famous, *and* modern. Their travels around the world, their decadent palaces, and their beautiful clothing were all chronicled by various newspapers and magazines, and they

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<sup>168</sup> Alternate spellings: Medferiashwork

eventually became associated with what it was to not only be citizens of a modern Ethiopia, but also citizens of the world. If Emperor Haile Selassie's public image was associated with his politics, then his children were perceived as having much more freedom to present themselves as they pleased, even if this was not necessarily the case.

The most significant factor in the emperor's children being perceived in such a way was the fact that they were largely presented as *regular* people, despite the fact that their lives were anything but ordinary. When not engaged in official state business, the princes and princesses were often seen and photographed participating in activities that may not have been things that Ethiopians did on a daily basis at the time, such as learning to drive a car, lounging by a swimming pool, playing with their children at the beach, or playing cards. These activities represented a casual engagement with social activities that made the royal family appear more accessible. Similarly, in portraits of the emperor's children, they were represented (or represented themselves) as young men and women, not necessarily as young nobility.

This chapter is organized according to photographic styles—formal portraits of the extended royal family and snapshots or photographs in action. As the media became increasingly invasive over the years, various aspects of the royal family's lives were presented for public display. This chapter explores the role of photographs as they emerged from the private into the public domain. Additionally, a new understanding of the domestic sphere came into being specifically through royal family portraiture. The visual construction of modern life in Ethiopia was shaped by these images of the royal family. From dressing the body to situating the self within the social order, photographs of the princes and princesses extended beyond the emperor's role of asserting general social and political agendas. They served as

guidelines for the rapidly changing lives in urban centers, providing Ethiopians with new ways of understanding their subjectivity.

### *The New Style of Portraiture*

The Crown Prince Asfa Wosen was only fourteen when his father assumed the throne in 1930. At the young age of sixteen, he made a diplomatic journey to Europe to pay respect to the governments that had sent envoys to his father's coronation two years prior. By the time he was twenty, he had married his first wife Wolete Israel, had a daughter Ijigayehu, and been forced to flee his homeland. When the royal family first arrived in England, the crown prince still appeared childlike and had yet to mature physically into the body of a young man [Figure 4.2]. Dressed in Western clothing, he often appeared awkward and gangly—his arms and legs too long and skinny to properly “fill out” the suits he wore. More often than not, the fabric just seemed to hang on his small, boyish frame. By the time he returned to Africa in 1940 via Khartoum,<sup>169</sup> Asfa Wosen's shoulders had broadened, his sharp, angular features had softened, and he had grown a mustache that he would wear throughout his adult life. Though he was still thin, he appeared authoritative and confident in the military uniform that was to become his trademark official attire for the next several decades [Figure 5.2]. However, the fact that he had matured physically was not the only reason why the crown prince appeared so much more self-assured and comfortable in suits and ties after living in England for five years.

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<sup>169</sup> Crown Prince Asfa Wosen and Prince Makonnen spent much of 1940 in Sudan in preparation of their return to Ethiopia. Numerous photographs from their stay in Sudan were printed in *H.I.H. Makonnen, Duke of Harar: Life and Records*, a large book that was published by the imperial government as a tribute to Prince Makonnen following his untimely death in 1957 at the age of 34.

The time he spent in England shaped the ways in which he experienced his role as the heir to an empire. Demonstrated by the numerous photographs of him that were taken during his time in England, the crown prince appeared to gradually settle into the fashions and styles of the 1930s. During his family's five years of exile, Asfa Wosen attended the University of Liverpool where he studied Political Science and experienced the life of a young student in a British academic institution. Returning to Ethiopia in an official capacity, Asfa Wosen asserted his identity as a chief military leader and high government official through his choice of attire. The military uniform quickly became associated with the monarchy, but at the same time, both Haile Selassie and the crown prince were equally identified by the Western suits they often wore in public. Both outfits signaled professionalism and authority in the West, but in the Ethiopian context, their clothes additionally signified nobility, privilege, wealth, access and most importantly, a *modern* engagement with these ideals. What was unique to the emperor's children and the visual depictions of their dressed bodies was their *embodiment* of the clothes they wore *as well as* the ways in which those bodies were situated within space, both private and public.

For the royal family, portraiture could generally be identified with public space because despite the fact that they were often staged as moments of personal reflection (such as images that depicted the subject reading a book or playing with a child, see Figures 5.5, 5.6 and 6.1), these images were specifically created with a public audience in mind. As such, photographic portraits of Ethiopian royalty can be understood as a public forum in which the subjects presented images of ideal bodies and bodily behaviors that in turn acted as a system of power, in effect *disciplining* the urban citizen. However, in order to present the royal body as an ideal body that could properly be related to by the general public, certain markers of imperial identity

needed to be erased. In this case, the bodies of the emperor's children functioned as models of Ethiopian citizenship rather than as models of the imperial state.

In Figure 5.2, the visual markers that signify Asfa Wosen as being the crown prince are relatively inconspicuous. The medals of the imperial crown and the Lion of Judah on his hat and the insignia on the collar of his jacket are the only indication of his title and status. The uniform itself is comparable with the attire of other Ethiopian military figures at the time. Though he does not make direct eye contact with the camera and is handsomely presented as being in a position of prestige, the air of importance and formality that surround portraits of the emperor are not apparent in this image of the heir.

The relaxed and informal impression in Asfa Wosen's portraits is due in part to how he negotiated the space between himself as royalty and as a modern citizen of the world. The time he spent with his young family in Europe, particularly France, during the 1940s and 1950s is reflected in his manner of dress as well as the ways in which he signified the various social meanings of his attire. For Haile Selassie, his adoption of Western style clothing was a conscious characterization of his social and political agendas as a ruler. His public image was a performance, whether or not he was in front of a camera. For Asfa Wosen, on the other hand, his clothing emerged through a *lived experience*. The clothes he wore were less of a deliberate representation of a relationship with modern styles than they had been for his father. Though the crown prince's presentation of self can also be thought of as a performance, the fluidity with which he moved between Western and non-Western styles attests to the ease with which he navigated the physical space as well.



Figure 5.2: Crown Prince Asfa Wosen  
Haigaz Boyadjian, Ethiopia, c. 1941  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

Constantly traveling and attending social events around the world, Asfa Wosen and his siblings lived and embodied the lifestyle of young, modern and international citizens. Photographs of the crown prince in fashionable men's wear as he walked down the streets of European cities [Figure 5.7] and images of the princesses dressed in beautiful ball gowns socializing at parties [Figure 5.8] simultaneously situated their lives firmly within the public sphere and provided Ethiopia's urban citizens the opportunity to *become a part* of the royal family's encounters with modernity. Their individual lived experiences gradually became a part of the shared, public understanding of the world beyond Ethiopia's borders. For the vast majority of Ethiopians, particularly those in rural areas, access to education and opportunities to travel abroad remained relatively impossible to attain. However, for a small but growing group of young, urban citizens, the cosmopolitan lifestyles of the country's nobility straddled the line between the possible and the impossible, between reality and fantasy.

Although Haile Selassie was instrumental in democratizing clothing by wearing styles that could theoretically be worn by anyone rather than the elaborately decorated traditional robes of the nobility, his public wardrobe was mainly limited to a few key outfits. The emperor presented himself in either ceremonial clothing, which gradually transformed from silk and velvet cloaks with gold embroidery to Western-influenced military regalia, or for less formal affairs, he dressed in dark three-piece suits. On the other hand, his children explored the full range of fashions available at the time, including clothing that was accessible and available to a growing group of Ethiopians. Photographs of the princes and princesses dressed in styles that were all but limited to the royal family certainly existed (such as the men's military dress uniforms, the women's extravagant ball gowns, and the traditional robes of the nobility). These images were significant in establishing a sense of national pride in

Ethiopia's membership in the elite of the world's most powerful countries. However, photographs of the emperor's children in more casual and accessible clothing were central in transforming and fashioning the Ethiopian body in relation to modernity. Rather than standing rigid and posing in front of a plain backdrop or palatial furniture, portraits of the princes and princesses were often highly stylized and contained both obvious and discrete indications of a dialogue with modernity [Figure 5.3 and 5.4].

In Figure 5.3, the crown prince is dressed in a three-piece wool suit complete with a matching handkerchief in the right breast pocket, but unlike the formality of the dark, solid-colored suit regularly worn by the emperor, the plaid design more closely aligns the suit with a relaxed fashion. Asfa Wosen focuses his gaze slightly away from the camera. He neither looks directly at his viewer nor does he appear to purposely avoid eye contact. The soft focus lends a sense of romanticism to the photograph, conveying a softer, more human side of the heir to the Throne. The blurred background aids in making the physical space that he occupies insignificant. As a portrait by Tony Boyadjian, it is likely that the photograph was taken at the crown prince's residence, but the possibility of the having been taken at a photographer's studio exists in that the image strongly suggests an ambiguity in its location.

On the other hand, the photograph of Crown Princess Medferiash Worke in Figure 5.4 is clearly a studio portrait. Also, rather than her clothing signifying a relationship with modernity, in this image, it is her lack of clothing that distinguishes her "modern" body from the traditional. The close-up of her face differs significantly from typical portraits from Ethiopia at the time. Portraits of the nobility normally showed at least the upper half of the body, which was usually entirely covered by the cloak worn by the aristocracy. This photograph, taken in France during the early half of the 1940s, focuses on her facial features, which distinguishes her from other people and identifies her as an individual. However, at the same time, the image also



functions in much the same way as that of the crown prince by Tony Boyadjian. There are no overt signs of the princess's aristocratic background, and this very lack of signifiers alludes to the fact that she could be anyone, and alternatively, anyone else could be her as well.

Portrait photographs of the emperor's children, however, were not limited to posed presentations of fashionable dress. Numerous photographs depicted the royal body engaging in an everyday practice. Various "techniques of the body" were recreated in visual form as models of *modern* behavior. These techniques, such as reading a book or playing with a child, in many ways enter into the "fashion" system as learned behaviors that help define the body as socially acceptable or unacceptable. In Ethiopia, the "fashioning" of modernity was carried out through a relationship between the physical clothing, the body, and the ways in which the dressed body behaved within the modern space it occupied.

For example, the image of Princess Tenange Worke in Figure 5.5 depicts the emperor's eldest daughter dressed in a fashionable black dress, wearing delicate drop earrings and a pearl necklace. Seated at a desk, reading a book, the portrait depicts a scene that appears natural, although as a studio portrait, the viewer understands that the scene is contrived. The princess is impeccably presented, and the open page of the book she is reading shows a photographic portrait, indicating that she is reading a *modern* text, possibly a historical biography, rather than a traditional Amharic or Ge'ez (religious) text.<sup>170</sup> The princess's self-presentation reflects an embodiment of the ideals and benefits of modern education.

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<sup>170</sup> Ge'ez is the traditional language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.



Figure 5.3: Crown Prince Asfa Wosen  
Torkom "Tony" Boyadjian, c. 1945  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University



Figure 5.4: Crown Princess Medferiash Worke  
J. Stara Studios, France, c. 1943  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopia Studies, Addis Ababa University





Figure 5.5: Princess Tenange Worke  
Photographer Unknown, probably England, c. 1938  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

In comparison with Figure 5.6 of the Crown Prince Medferiash Worke by Tony Boyadjian, the image of Tenange Worke appears less artificial. Though the Boyadjian portrait was taken in the Palace of the Crown Prince, Medferiash Worke's unnatural pose, the perfect folds on her dress as it falls in a perfect circle around her, and the

soft, artificial lighting falling from the upper left hand corner of the photograph give the image more of the appearance of a staged performance than the portrait of Princess Tenange Worke. On the other hand, the portrait of the crown princess provides other signifiers of modernity that enhance the overall goal of the image. The ornate marble fireplace and the candelabra, clock and vases on the mantle indicate a wealthy and elaborate environment, one that properly reflects the ideals that the crown princess embodies through the act of reading.

The ability of these images to contain and subsequently project meaning is what makes the photograph as a medium of visual representation unique. The fact that the camera can create realistic and infinitely reproducible images endows photography with a representational power. The social significance of photography is reliant on the fact that it is not merely a technology of visual representation, but a constitutive type of visual action within the social world. In other words, photography is what Paul Frosh calls a “performance of representation” in which both the act itself and the material product of the act—the image—produce multiple and interrelated meanings.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Paul Frosh, “The Public Eye and the Citizen Voyeur: Photography as a Performance of Power,” *Social Semiotics*, 11:4 (2001) 43.



Figure 5.6: Crown Princess Medferiash Worke  
Torkom “Tony” Boyadjian, Ethiopia, c. 1945  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

### *Circulation of Images Beyond the Portrait*

The 1940s and 1950s were a time of significant changes in Ethiopian society in terms of politics, economics, education and culture. Visual indications of these changes often manifested themselves in the clothing of the people at the center of the transformations. However, these photographs not only portray the fashionable and handsome clothing of, in many respects, the *new* Ethiopian royalty, but also the conflicts that arose when tradition and modern, private and public met as well as the subsequent altering of their relationship with social spaces.

During the same time period, print culture in Ethiopia was becoming increasingly sophisticated. Newspapers and magazines continued to be monitored by the state throughout Haile Selassie's reign, and photographs of the royal family were either distributed by the Ministry of Information or were taken by a select group of royal court photographers. However, the number and type of photographic images that began to appear in the 1940s and 1950s rose dramatically. In the early 1940s, *Addis Zemen*, the major Amharic language newspaper, printed very few images and was largely limited to formal portraits of the royal family. A vast majority of these portraits depicted the royal family in Western clothing, whether it was the emperor in Western-style military dress or Princess Tsehai in a dress with pearl jewelry and her hair styled according to European fashions. By the late 1940s, the number of photographic images increased from one or two per issue (at the most) to approximately six to ten per issue. Additionally, rather than exclusively printing formal portraits, action photographs of the royal family at various social functions became more common.

In the early 1950s, *Addis Zemen* began to publish photographs of foreign leaders and dignitaries together with members of the royal family. Images depicting European royalty on state visits to Ethiopia as well as photographs of the royal family on their travels to the United States and Europe were printed daily, often with little

concern for *when* the photograph was taken. Portraits of various members of the royal family from the early 1940s were printed alongside more recent images although even the current events photographs ranged as much as two years from the date of publication. The number of current events photographs that depicted the royal family engaging in official business grew steadily over the years, and by the 1960s, formal portrait photographs were rarely printed. Generally, portrait photographs were reserved for special issues (for example, anniversary and birthday celebrations).

The general format of the newspaper also changed considerably during the 1950s. *Addis Zemen* began to include advertisements for imported products such as Johnny Walker whiskey, Palmolive shave cream and Shell gasoline. The newspaper more than doubled in length, fully reflecting Western publications with large, half-page advertisements for cars and travel agencies, and various sections on sports, comics, family and society, including wedding and birth announcements. At the same time, photographs that appeared in newspapers were no longer exclusively of the royal family. In a 1953/54 issue of *Addis Zemen* (1946 E.C.), which featured the wedding celebration of the crown prince's eldest daughter Princess Ijigayehu, wedding announcements were made for several other notable couples. However, in Ethiopia's political system at the time, high government positions continued to be held almost exclusively by the nobility; thus, members of "high society" were limited to those of noble birth, most of whom were somehow related to the royal family.

The mid-1960s marked a significant change in the visual representation of Ethiopians in the mass media. Newspapers and magazines began to feature newsworthy articles and images that did not involve the royal family. Until then, the royal family maintained a relative monopoly over *how* the modern, Ethiopian body was fashioned. Aside from formal portraits that depicted the emperor and his children in clothing representative of the new empire, current events images and photographs



depicting the royal family “in action” dominated the visual construction of Ethiopia. Photographs such as the one of Asfa Wosen and *Ato* Abebe Retta walking down a city street situated members of the royal family in a *real* space rather than an imaginary space created in a portrait studio or one of many imperial palaces.<sup>172</sup> In these photographs, signs and symbols of nobility or status were often excluded, and even when they were obviously presented as royalty, Ethiopia’s elite was depicted as belonging to a larger, global community. These images simultaneously served to situate the royal family as individuals within a modern, international space as well as to identify them as not belonging to a highly exclusive group with power and wealth.

The photograph of Asfa Wosen and Abebe Retta is a highly successful image in this manner. Dressed fashionably in suits, wool overcoats and bowler hats, they additionally occupy a “modern” space. The paved sidewalk and the wrought-iron fence behind them are a *real* environment that echoes the nature of their clothing. Both the clothes and the outdoor, urban space signify a common atmosphere rather than a royal one. Additionally, the unidentified man standing in the back alludes to the fact that these two men—a crown prince and an ambassador—are simply walking down the street without the pomp and circumstance of the royal court. The photograph indicates that they could potentially be ordinary men strolling through the city streets.

As an “action shot,” this image captures a moment in time in which the Asfa Wosen and his acquaintance occupy a particular space. This physical space subsequently indicates a new “technique of the body” as well. The umbrella and the cane both function as further suggestion of their embodiment of these new techniques. As an extension of the body, the accessories they hold in their hands alter the body’s

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<sup>172</sup> *Ato* Abebe Retta, later Ethiopia’s ambassador to England, held various positions in the imperial government throughout his lifetime. Also, he fathered a child, Emebet Tsige Mariam, with Princess Tenenge Worke during a brief union while the family was in exile in England.

experience of the space around them. Changing the way one walks, the objects themselves serve as agents of the living, moving body.



Figure 5.7: Crown Prince Asfa Wosen and *Ato* Abebe Retta  
Photographer Unknown, Europe (probably England), c. 1950  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

Similarly, in Figure 5.8, Princess Sara Gizaw demonstrates the shifting of ideals through new bodily techniques. The princess, dressed beautifully in a Western ball gown complete with a tiara and high-heeled shoes, appears to be enjoying the company of an unidentified woman at a party.<sup>173</sup> The event most likely took place in Europe, as indicated by the furniture in the background and also by the princess's manner of dress. The royal women often dressed in traditionally inspired fashions for events that were held in Ethiopia. Perhaps what is most interesting about this image, however, is the fact that Princess Sara Gizaw casually holds a cigarette in her right hand. Although there are many photographs of both Sara Gizaw and Princess Medferiash Worke smoking in existence in the archives at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, most of these images are from the royal family's private collections that were bequeathed to the Institute. These images were probably not seen by the *Ethiopian* public. On the other hand, this image of the princess comes from a social event that was likely recorded by numerous photographers from various countries; thus, this photograph or others taken at the time were probably released to the public in some capacity and would have been seen by people outside of Ethiopia.

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<sup>173</sup> Although many attempts were made to name the woman sitting to Princess Sara Gizaw's right, I was unsuccessful at determining her identity. Her tiara is most similar to one worn by the Grand Duchess Charlotte of Belgium, but in terms of age and appearance, it is possible that she is Princess Maertha of Sweden. However, this is merely an educated guess and the information is unconfirmed.



Figure 5.8: Princess Sara Gizaw with unnamed person  
Photographer Unknown, probably in Europe, c. 1958  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

Smoking was, and remains to be, a culturally and religiously unacceptable practice, particularly among women. According to accounts from travelers dating back to the early nineteenth century, the Orthodox Church was strongly opposed to smoking and no one who had smoked was allowed to enter a church.<sup>174</sup> Believed to have

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<sup>174</sup> Pankhurst, *Social History*, 201.

originated among Muslims, and later gaining popularity with other non-Christian sections of the population, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church took a particularly harsh disliking to the practice. Various religious texts refer to tobacco plants as being “poisoned by the devil” and “more impure than hyena’s flesh.”<sup>175</sup> With roots firmly planted in religion, smoking was described and condemned for being an un-Christian habit. Even as exposure to foreigners smoking increased in urban areas in early half of the twentieth century, many Ethiopians still considered the practice unacceptable.

Considering the intensity of the condemnation of smoking among Ethiopia’s Christian population, the photograph of Princess Sara Gizaw with a cigarette in hand becomes much more significant in terms of the conscious decisions made by the members of the royal family in how they navigated the often unfamiliar waters of international diplomatic relationships. To European observers, and to a lesser extent Ethiopian observers as well, the royal family projected or represented an absolute embodiment of fashionable Western attire and behavior.

At the same time, photographs of the emperor’s children reveal a stark difference between the ways in which they presented themselves to the public in and out of Ethiopia. When in Europe, they reflected the ideals of young, carefree men and women. They were often photographed at cafes and restaurants, engaged in conversations with their European friends. Figure 5.9 depicts the couple at a poolside bar in Marseille, lounging casually in their chairs. Crown Princess Medferiash Worke holds a cigarette in her right hand as she speaks to someone on her left (beyond the picture plane).

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<sup>175</sup> Quoted in Pankhurst, *Social History*, 312.





Figure 5.9: Crown Prince Asfa Wosen and Crown Princess Medferiash Worke  
J. Feneyrol Studio, Marseille, France, c. 1955  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

Framed as an informal image, this photograph is suggestive of an intimate moment between friends. However, the fact that the photograph was taken by a photography studio indicates that the subjects are aware of the camera's presence and the implications of their actions before the lens.

As opposed to images of the family from Europe, photographs taken in Ethiopia and released to the media were constructed in a way that reflected Ethiopian ideals and standards of social behavior. Even when so-called “casual” moments were captured, the subjects' clothing and poses were far more structured and deliberate. For example, Haile Selassie's youngest child, Prince Sahle Selassie and his granddaughter Princess Sebla Desta (daughter of Princess Tenange Worke) were often photographed at social and political events with the emperor. Of the photographs that appeared of them in *Addis Zemen* during the early to mid-1950s, many of them portrayed the two

younger members of the royal family smiling and laughing together. However, the subjects in these photographs were always dressed in formal attire (typically Western-style business suits) and the stiffness in their poses reflected the formality of their clothing.

The numerous photographs that appeared in Ethiopian publications strongly reflected the imperial agenda on both the social and political levels. As a government newspaper, *Addis Zemen* in particular represented the ideals that the royal family desired to project to the Ethiopian public. The following chapter examines other publications including English newspapers and magazines that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as they relate to the imperial agenda as well as how they further transformed Ethiopia's relationship with modernity.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Modernity and the Life of Photographs

*If an image that appears to do a particular kind of work in one episteme is able to perform radically different work in another, it appears inappropriate to propose inflexible links between formal qualities and effect. Instead we need a more nuanced reading of the affinities between particular discursive formations and the image worlds that parallel them, as well as sophisticated analyses of their transformational potentialities.*<sup>176</sup>

Christopher Pinney

In the introduction to *Photography's Other Histories*, Pinney argues that images, particularly mimetic photographic images, exhibit an excess of aesthetic and historical information. Across time and cultures, this representational excess, what Olu Oguibe terms “the substance of the image,” continues to act upon the viewers of the image with “transformational potentialities.” Pinney is concerned primarily with the greater problem of the mis-recognition of photographs, particularly those from outside the West, as they travel over space and time and calls for a theory that “addresses the often radically different nexus of world, human subject, and presentational practice whose contours photographic practice throws sharply into relief.”<sup>177</sup> However, regardless of how an image is read, photographs continue to produce meaning and to *act upon* their viewers. At the same time, unlike other forms of representation, the photographic image produces a unique space in which it encourages an encounter with otherness in its audiences. Photography is “a context for the experience of alterity for its subjects, those who have posed for an image that will be recognizable to them as a

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<sup>176</sup> Christopher Pinney, “Introduction: ‘How the Other Half...’” *Photography's Other Histories*, ed. Christopher Pinney (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) 3.

<sup>177</sup> Pinney, “Introduction,” 12. See also Kobena Mercer, “African Photography in Contemporary Visual Culture,” *Camera Austria*, 75 (2001).



‘photographic portrait’ and more than just a realistic depiction.”<sup>178</sup> In other words, photographs carry with them the ability to transform their viewers through both an identification with the image and the realization of otherness.

The previous sections explored photographs of Haile Selassie and his family in terms of how they “fashioned” their own subjectivity. Their performances *within* the images reflected their interactions with modernity and how they situated themselves in both international and local environments. This chapter considers the agency embedded in photographic images of Ethiopia’s royal family and the ways in which that agency acted upon the audience at the time. The public display of seemingly private moments functioned as a means of educating Ethiopian citizens through the mass media. This chapter also further explores the visibility of these images through an analysis of the growing print media from 1940 to 1970. During these three crucial decades, the public presentation of the country’s past-history, present-condition and future-aspirations were directly reflected in and powered through photographs reproduced in newspapers and magazines.

### *Publicizing the Private in Portraits*

Over the course of his life, the camera gradually became a ubiquitous presence in Emperor Haile Selassie’s life. The earliest photographs of the young Tafari Makonnen date back to 1898 when he was only 6 years old. Transforming from a unique experience that only occurred once every few years to employing his own photographers and finally to being surrounded by cameras and having every moment in his public life observed through the lens, the emperor’s relationship with the camera changed significantly during his lifetime. The very presence of cameras was

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<sup>178</sup> John Pepper, “Africa’s Diaspora of Images,” *Third Text*, 19:4 (July 1005) 347.

something that became an essential part of Haile Selassie's life, particularly in the later years of his reign. Until he became emperor of Ethiopia and a formidable presence in the international arena, the emperor only had his photograph taken at formal events and as posed portraits.

For the emperor's children, on the other hand, the camera was a constant presence in their lives from the time they were young children. As the discussion in Chapter Five indicates, Haile Selassie's children were far more familiar or *at ease* with the camera than either of their parents. In addition to portraying more accessible and more human qualities, the princes and princesses also revealed aspects of their private lives through photographs, portraits and public life images alike. More likely than not, these private moments were staged, but regardless of their performative nature, the merging of the private and public realms is significant in that those private moments helped shape the public world through a visual reorganization of the cultural order.

Photographs depicting the princesses engaged in an activity such as reading [Figures 5.5 and 5.6] initially imply the photographic subjects' relationship with the activity itself. Medferiash Worke and Tenange Worke project their own identities in relation to the act of reading. Their clothing and hairstyles as well as the poses they hold in the photographs reflect the meticulous and self-reflective aspects of their roles as public figures. At the same time, the individual act of reading alludes to the new social and cultural values placed on education, bringing the private act into the public realm. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the representational power of the photograph is what acts upon its viewers. However, this power necessarily depends on the viewer's understanding of the social context and, to some degree, the technical processes through which the image is created.<sup>179</sup> In other words, the viewer must be

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<sup>179</sup> See Jacques Aumont, *The Image*, trans. Claire Pajackowska (London: British Film Institute, 1997).

able to distinguish the indexical and iconic signification within the photograph, recognizing the difference between reality and representation. In Ethiopia, the social context within which photography developed was heavily reliant on the imperial agenda. The first photographs that became available for public consumption were exclusively of the royal family, and this same circle of approximately ten to fifteen people was the primary focus of public images for nearly twenty years.

In these photographs, the message that is encoded into the image is a conscious effort on the part of the photographed subject, particularly in the case of staged portraits. In family portraits that recreate a domestic space, the image often denies the invasive characteristic of the camera, either “welcoming” the camera into the private space or ignoring the presence of the camera altogether.<sup>180</sup> In both Figures 5.5 and 5.6, the princesses take no notice of the camera, appearing to be engrossed in the act of reading. On the other hand, the obviously public image such as the photograph in Figure 5.7 acknowledges the existence of the camera and the power of the photograph’s representational properties. *Ato Abebe Retta*, while not looking directly into the lens, makes the camera’s presence known. In doing so, he calls attention to the fact that the crown prince avoids the camera’s gaze, perhaps intentionally so. The visible extent of the photograph’s intrusive quality supports the idea that as a public image, what the viewer experiences in this photograph is an overtly public one, thus one that is (conflictingly) less revealing.

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<sup>180</sup> Frosh, “The Public Eye,” 44.



Figure 6.1: Crown Princess Medferiash Worke and Princess Maryam Senna  
Torkom “Tony” Boyadjian, Ethiopia, c. 1945  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

The publicizing of the private alludes to a *privileged* exposure of something that would not normally be disclosed. In Figure 6.1, Crown Princess Medferiash Worke holds her eldest daughter Princess Maryam Senna. Both subjects, dressed

beautifully in Western clothing, ignore the presence of the photographer and the camera. What the photograph pretends to show the viewer is an intimate moment between mother and child, but this private experience made public relies on the fact that members of the royal family are in the position to situate their lives as a public example. Frosh states that: “Photography, as a manifest performance of the *power* to make visible, has become fundamental to our use of the social [my emphasis].”<sup>181</sup>

The royal family was obviously situated in a position of power, which allowed them to construct their own representation, to encode the image with particular meanings or messages. Figure 6.1 stresses the relationship between a mother and her child, drawing upon the ideals of the modern, nuclear family as well as the upper class woman of leisure who has the time and ability to care for her child “properly.”

Likewise, in Figure 6.2, a photograph that was taken in France following the birth of their second daughter Princess Sehin Azebe, Asfa Wosen and Medferiash Worke represent newfound values placed on the relationship among family members. The mother properly cradles her newborn child in her arms while smiling at the camera, appearing alert and refreshed, despite having recently given birth (or so one could assume from the photograph). The father stands protectively over his wife and child, his left arm on the pillow behind his wife’s head as if to shield them. Ignoring for a moment the formality of the setting itself, the physical relationship between the three people in the photograph to each other as well as to the camera creates an effective dramatization of a private, family moment.

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<sup>181</sup> Frosh, “The Public Eye,” 45.





Figure 6.2: Crown Prince Asfa Wosen and Crown Princess Medferiash Worke following the birth of their second child, Princess Sehin Azebe  
Photographer Unknown, France, c. 1946  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

The public display of these types of moments had not previously been an Ethiopian custom, but increasingly, announcements of personal milestones such as weddings, births and birthdays became a familiar part of public life in Ethiopia's urban centers. Mass public celebration such as the emperor's silver jubilee, his birthdays, or the birth of his grandchildren served to create a sense of cohesion among Ethiopian citizens by encouraging participation in a national event, but more significantly, these public displays provided the illusion of sharing or involvement in the private lives of the royal family. For most urban citizens, this participation occurred through the photographic image, made available in mass publications.

In an examination of the visualization of the British monarchy, Simon Schama asserts that certain monarchies have survived into the twentieth century because of "a calculated combination of the ritual and the prosaic; of high ceremony and bourgeois demystification."<sup>182</sup> This "reinvention" of tradition involved two distinct methods of self-presentation. Elaborate coronation ceremonies reinvigorated the program of ritual and spectacle, and a reshaping of the monarchy as a familial unit brought the private lives of these public spectacles into the domestic sphere.<sup>183</sup> Both of these techniques relied on visual representations. Schama and David Cannadine discuss the social uses of painted portraits prior to the invention of photography; however, once images of the monarchy were distributed in mass quantities through the photographic medium, the

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<sup>182</sup> Simon Schama, "The Domestication of Majesty: Royal Family Portraiture, 1500-1850," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 17:1 (Summer 1986), 155.

<sup>183</sup> For an insightful discussion of the ritual and spectacle of the British monarchy, see David Cannadine, "The Context, Performance, and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the 'Invention of Tradition,' 1820-1977," *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 101-164.

power to actively shape public perceptions of both monarchy and state became a preoccupation for many heads of state.<sup>184</sup>

An obvious historical connection can be made between photography and the emergence of the public as a domain of openness and visibility. As Allan Sekula argues in “The Body and the Archive,” shortly after its invention, photography became increasingly employed for explicit social purposes, particularly for the task of sustaining the hierarchical order of social and political agendas. Although in the form of portraits, photography democratized the highly elitist practice of painted portraits of the mighty and the wealthy by becoming available to the growing middle classes, it also brought images of the ruling classes into the homes and daily lives of the ruled in quantities never before thought possible.<sup>185</sup> The availability of photographic images to the wider public create new meanings as the images move from the domestic sphere into the public domain, but at the center of this heightened visibility is an exertion of *power*.

Scholarship on photography from the African continent has always been preoccupied with power, but it almost exclusively considered the structure of power between the photographed subject and the person behind the camera (i.e., missionary photographs, postcards and images of the civilizing mission). More often than not, at the center of the debate have been critiques of the uses of photography as a tool of colonialism, an instrument of repressive power. With the “discovery” of the portraits of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé, discussions of the power, or agency, in portraits were opened up to include the photographed subject.<sup>186</sup> Here, in the case of

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<sup>184</sup> For an detailed discussion of Prince Albert and Queen Victoria’s patronage of photography, see Frances Dimond and Roger Taylor, *Crown and Camera: The Royal Family and Photography, 1842-1910* (Middlesex and New York: Penguin Books and Viking Penguin, Inc., 1987).

<sup>185</sup> Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 345.

<sup>186</sup> There has been much criticism of the term “discover” that was used to describe André Magnin’s purchase and exhibition of the Mali photographs in the Pigozzi Collection.



photographs of the Ethiopian monarchy, the power-ful forces at play extend beyond what the subject him/herself exerts to the institution behind the person.

As Sekula and other have argued, the use of photographs as a visually repressive power necessarily assumes a docile and manageable group of viewers. This includes assumptions held by the photographed subject and the photographer with regards to the image's potential audience and their "right" to see. Typically, these "assumptions...are frequently in conflict and...demonstrate differential power relations."<sup>187</sup> The awareness of these "differential power relations" is made visible in the photograph through the ways the subject is styled—the pose, eye contact—the construction of the physical space within the frame and the ways in which the photographed responds to the presence of the camera.

However, in terms of regulating the social body, institutionally supported representations cannot be considered an entirely negative, repressive practice. Foucault has argued that social power operates by means of a constructively transformative controlling of the body.<sup>188</sup> "Control" in this case is subversive rather than oppressive. Photographic representations of the Ethiopian royal family constituted a subtle, government-endorsed means of influencing or manipulating the body in Ethiopian society. Haile Selassie was well aware of the fact that change would not come quickly in Ethiopia, and part of his "success" as an emperor of a rapidly changing nation was the fact that he *encouraged* change rather than forcing it. The emperor writes in his autobiography:

...We have set out to the best of Our ability to improve, gradually, internal administration by introducing to the country western modes of civilization through which Our people may attain a higher level; hence Our conscience does not rebuke Us...With people who have lived by

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<sup>187</sup> Frosh, "The Public Eye," 44.

<sup>188</sup> See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* and also *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

custom only, without learning at school without absorbing knowledge by the ear or observing and searching with the eye, it is necessary to accustom them, through education, to abandon habits by which they have for long been living, to make them accept new ways—yet not by hasty or cruel methods but by patience and study, gradually and over a prolonged period.<sup>189</sup>

In his own words, transitioning from a traditional, feudal system to a parliamentary monarchy as well as modernizing the country would be met with resistance. Additionally, it was not the emperor's goal to uproot the whole of Ethiopian tradition and culture. His desire was to incorporate the benefits of modernization into his country, primarily for economic and development purposes, not to replace Ethiopia's unique history with a Western model. Haile Selassie's (self)-characterization as "the father of Ethiopian education" expanded beyond the founding of schools in Addis Ababa and the encouragement of study abroad.

One of the oldest *modern* publications in Ethiopia, *Addis Zemen*, began circulating in 1940/41.<sup>190</sup> (Although other publications existed prior to *Addis Zemen*, such as the weekly newsmagazine *Berhanena Salam* and a number of publications supported by the Italians during the occupation, readership was either limited to the educated nobility and had little to no effect on the general public or publication ended in 1941 with the restoration of the monarchy.<sup>191</sup>) Though photographs did not become an essential part of the newspaper reading experience until the early 1950s, images that appeared throughout the 1940s in *Addis Zemen* were almost exclusively of the royal family or the extended nobility (as discussed in Chapter Five). Images that appeared in 1940/41 include a portrait photograph of Emperor Haile Selassie in

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<sup>189</sup> Haile Selassie I, *Autobiography*, 5.

<sup>190</sup> The archives at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies date back to 1935 according to the Ethiopian calendar. This is noted as the third year of publication, which puts the first issue at 1933 E.C. or 1940/41 by the Gregorian calendar. It is much more likely that the newspaper began *after* the end of the Italian occupation in 1941.

<sup>191</sup> *Berhanena Salam* was in circulation from 1925 to 1936.

military attire, Princess Tsehai wearing a Western dress with pearl accessories, and a portrait of an Ethiopian patriot in military dress with the Afro hairstyle that was associated with the patriots at the time.<sup>192</sup>

Over the next decade, the number of images found in the newspaper increased significantly. The earlier issues often had only one or two images per issue, if there were any at all, but by the early 1950s, photographs became a crucial part of the newspaper experience. Occasionally, there were more images per page than text, and on average, more than three quarters of the photographs per issue were of the royal family. As a state-sponsored publication, the content of *Addis Zemen* served the government's agenda, representing the country and its leaders as having embraced the benefits of modernization, a goal that the newspaper's readers should also aspire towards.

Several more news publications, both daily newspapers and periodicals, began circulation during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1955, the monthly magazine *Menen* published its first issue, and by the mid 1960s, it had become one of the leading *English* publications of Ethiopian society and culture. As such, it targeted the growing number of Ethiopian youth who were educated either at English schools in Ethiopia or had studied abroad. Although the vast majority of the content was still focused on the royal family, articles began to reflect popular interests of the young, cosmopolitan elite. In the February 1964 issue, a feature article titled "The Latest Trends in Fashion," which included five photographs from a runway show, reported on fashion trends that incorporated traditional, Ethiopian elements into new dresses for young women. The September issue of the same year featured a story on the Miss Addis Ababa competition, accompanied by five photographs of the winner and other

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<sup>192</sup> During the war and throughout the Italian occupation, Ethiopian patriots refused to cut their hair and wore an earring in their left ear as a symbol of national pride and solidarity.

contestants. In addition to these articles, advertisements began to reflect the interests of a wider group of people. As opposed to the highly male-oriented ads in *Addis Zemen* (i.e., liquor, shaving cream, gasoline), *Menen* featured advertisements for watches (Omega and Roamer of Switzerland), beauty treatments for dark complexions (Florozone), and Parker pens as well as agricultural tools, Hungarian hunting guns and the British Overseas Airways Corporation.

Several more English-language magazines and newspapers entered circulation during the 1960s, including *The Addis Reporter*, a weekly newspaper that incorporated news reporting with a variety of reports on Ethiopian culture and society. In addition to meeting the needs of educated, English-speaking Ethiopians, these newspapers increasingly addressed the interests of the growing foreign population in the country, particularly in Addis Ababa. In 1964, *Menen* dedicated an entire issue to content on the Queen of Sheba, which included a painted portrait of the Queen by Afework Tekle, the first Ethiopian modern artist to gain international acclaim.<sup>193</sup> Although this issue served as both a celebration and reiteration of an “imaginary” shared heritage for the Ethiopian public, it also functioned as an assertion of cultural identity and pride for foreign readers. In its first year of publication, *The Addis Reporter* included articles on *modern* Ethiopian women working in law enforcement and how they dressed, Yugoslavian artist Ana Marlja Sulentic, the first group of Ethiopian students to travel to Europe for education in the early 1800s, and space exploration and the anticipation of man’s first walk on the moon.<sup>194</sup> Most of these articles (with the exception of “Ethiopia’s First Students Abroad”) were accompanied by several photographs to augment the “education” of the Ethiopian public on the country’s new modern outlook

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<sup>193</sup> *Menen*, v. 8, no. 6, March 1964.

<sup>194</sup> “Our Daring Nightingales,” v. 1, no. 25, 20 June 1969; Solomon Deressa, “Where No Laughter Echoes” v. 1, no. 27, 4 July 1969; Richard Pankhurst, “Ethiopia’s First Students Abroad,” v. 1, no. 27, 4 July 1969; Walter Froenlich, “Man’s First Step Into the Infinite,” v. 1, no. 29, 18 July 1969.

as well as the historical traditions that created a cultural cohesiveness among its citizens.

Like *Menen*, the readership of *The Addis Reporter* was reflected not only in the journalistic content of the newspaper but the types of advertisements that appeared on its pages as well. Catering primarily to the educated elite, the newspaper advertised imported cigarettes and liquor, charter airlines, and tourist agencies. Advertisements, which typically included photographic images of the product, rarely depicted people engaging in activities with the advertised object itself. The physical body was not yet reflected as having embodied imported products, although these changes did eventually emerge in the 1970s. However, an ad for Viceroy cigarettes from the October 1963 issue of *Menen* features a white man promoting the brand.<sup>195</sup>

The content of these publications essentially functioned as signifiers for what was considered appropriate or inappropriate relationships with modernity. In addition to promoting acceptable practices such as women working outside the home to support civil institutions (i.e., the article on police women and their clothes), the Ethiopian media reported on questionable engagements with modern life and Western influence. On 4 March 1969, *The Addis Reporter* printed a story about the arrest of Miss Asmara Expo in Dire Dawa for dressing inappropriately:

Woizerit Zewde Araya, who won the Miss Asmara Expo beauty contest last month, went to Dire Dawa recently on a publicity tour. On her second day there, Miss Expo was touring the city along with her runner up and an escort provided by the Ethiopian Tourist Organization when a cop came over and arrested her for wearing a dress incompatible with the local tradition—miniskirt... The cops have reported to have told the

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<sup>195</sup> *Menen*, v. 1, no. 8, October 1963, p. 26. It would be interesting to examine the correlations between advertising images and cultural practices in Ethiopia. Because smoking was long considered a taboo practice, it is likely that although there were Ethiopians who smoked, the representation of an Ethiopian man or woman smoking in an advertisement would probably have been far more unacceptable than a foreigner seen smoking.

Miss Expo they do not want the tradition of their peaceful town to succumb to miniskirts.<sup>196</sup>

Rather than presenting the story of the beauty contestant's arrest as a violation of her right to dress in "modern" styles, the article focuses on the preservation of tradition in Dire Dawa. Haile Selassie's vision of modernization in Ethiopia differed significantly from Westernization, a comparison that is often made in terms of the non-West's relationship with the modern. Reflected in his self-presentation and the ways in which the government influenced Ethiopia's visual culture, the emperor was thoughtful of the benefits of modernization as well as the preservation of Ethiopian cultural heritage.

In terms of visual representations of the royal family, newspapers and magazines continued to chronicle the family's social lives and government activities with the same fervor into the 1970s. However, during the late 1960s, images of a *young* Emperor Haile Selassie were frequently incorporated into news stories. Among dozens of photographs of the emperor shaking hands with diplomats, addressing Parliament, and visiting schools and hospitals, images of the emperor as a child and as a young man increasingly appeared throughout the mass media. Interestingly, on the cover of the 25 July 1969 issue of *The Addis Reporter*, celebrating Haile Selassie's 77th birthday, a photograph of the emperor from more than thirty years prior was used for the cover.<sup>197</sup> In the 5-page article on his birthday celebrations, all of the images accompanying the article were from 1955 or earlier.

Official, formal portraits of the emperor became less common as he grew older, and once he reached his late 60s, Haile Selassie was less likely to be photographed if he was not actively involved in some sort of physical movement (i.e.,

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<sup>196</sup> "Miss Expo Arrested in Dire Dawa," *The Addis Reporter*, v. 1, no. 10, 25 July 1969.

<sup>197</sup> The photograph that appears on the cover of this issue was likely taken in England during his period of exile. He is dressed in a white shama and the black cloak with embroidered buttons that can be seen in both Figure 4.2 and 4.3.

waving to a crowd outside the White House with President Kennedy, attending mass, or posing to sign an official document). As the process of aging made the emperor's "frail" and "delicate" features appear more so, the public presentation of his physical body was carefully maintained in order to reflect the power and purpose of his leadership. The emperor's visibility remained prominent well into the 1960s, but he no longer relied on the compelling performative nature of portrait photographs. Instead, his physical presence was sustained through a combination of journalistic photographs of his body "in motion" and portrait performances of the emperor as a younger man.

On the other hand, the increased commodification of the body and of the "techniques of the body" during the 1960s steadily made the emperor's larger-than-life body less significant in terms of how his subjects situated themselves within the broader context of the modern world. "Fashioning" the modern subject through visual cues no longer relied solely on photographs of the royal family. From images of "high society" weddings in the 1950s to articles on fashion shows and beauty pageants in the following decade and the ever-increasing number of advertisements for cigarettes, liquor and travel, visualizing the modern Ethiopian citizen became a much more heterogeneous practice. Rather than the careful visualization of modern *life* by the royal family, "modernity" became available through a number of difference approaches. At the same time, the variety of publicly visible images continued to exhibit a particular, state-sponsored version of modernity—one in which imperialism remained at the forefront and overt signs of modernization by anyone not sponsored by the government were deemed inappropriate (i.e., Miss Asmara Expo's arrest). The monarchy, as a powerful entity, maintained control over the use and visibility of images, whether or not the royal family itself was represented.

### *Agency and the Public Image*

Despite the careful construction and presentation of the royal family's *visibility*, the power structure inherent in the politics of seeing complicates the imposition of institutionalized power. Although power can translate into the direct control of representation, the realm of public visibility is subject to the public's right to see and to interpret images. Allen Feldman addresses the question of how, or to what extent, public visibility is independent of the visual field of actual viewers in terms of what he refers to as the "scopic regime":

A scopic regime, like Foucault's panopticon or Lacan's mirror stage, is an apparatus behind which lies no one who sees, for *seeing*, no matter how privileged, is but one position in, internal to, and a function and product of the total scopic apparatus and is not the mechanism's point of origin. Hence, the distinction between the eye and the gaze. The latter is a mechanics of power, the former a sensory organ that can be socially appropriated to channel and materialize normative power in everyday life. Here human vision becomes an adjunct, an instrument and an automaton of the scopic regime.<sup>198</sup>

Like Crary's "techniques of the observer" and Foucault's "panoptic machine," Feldman characterizes human vision as a mechanical or technical process, one in which the individual, both in the case of the viewer and the person(s) being viewed, is removed from having control over what is projected and what is seen in the image. Thus, according to these analyses of vision, the potential to see is inevitably dictated by institutionalized power.

Institutionalized or government control over the politics of vision is distinctive in Ethiopia for a number of different reasons. The ability or power to make one's self visible is unquestionable in the case of the Ethiopian monarchy. Likewise, government

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<sup>198</sup> Allen Feldman, "Violence and Vision: The Prosthetics and Aesthetics of Terror," *States of Violence*, Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski, eds. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006) 432.



control of the mass media and the presentation of images was a direct assertion of state power. What complicates the obvious is the fact that according to the existing critical discourse on photography and vision, the politics of vision are embedded within a system that assumes a Western history of visual representation and “disciplining” of the body. To some extent, there are similarities between the existing model and the conditions surrounding photographic images in Ethiopia. However, in North America and Europe, the idea of representing the visual world through photographs developed and was accepted gradually for nearly a century before photography became common in Ethiopia. As discussed in Chapter Four, photographic technologies may have been brought to Ethiopia in the 1850s, but as a widely and easily accessible medium of representation, photography was not readily available until approximately the early 1940s. Even so, the only images that the vast majority of the urban population was exposed to were those of the royal family and other members of the nobility. Not until the 1950s were the average citizens able to have their own photographs taken with the same degree of control and awareness of their “presentation of self.”

Then the real question here is whether or not being able to construct a visual representation of the self is significant in understanding the representation of others. As Aumont states in *The Image*, being able to properly read a photograph requires a basic understanding of the technical aspects of how an image is created.<sup>199</sup> Aumont implies that the capacity to comprehend a visual object is somehow linked to intelligence or the ability to understand that the photograph is a replica of what actually exists (or existed at some point in time). The problem with this type of restriction is that it invariably creates a space in which marginalized groups of people can be characterized as not being able to appreciate or read photographs *properly*.

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<sup>199</sup> Aumont, *The Image*.

Whether as a “realistic,” “figurative,” or “iconic” representation, images function *as a representation* of what is pictured. In my discussion of portraiture in Africa in Chapter Two, I presented various types of visual human “portraits” that functioned as representations regardless of the realistic nature of those objects. What underlies the basic function of portraiture is that the object, be it a sculpture, a painting, or even a figurative mask that embodies the spiritual characteristics of a person rather than the physical, is understood by its viewers as having meaning. As Spraque argues, the value placed upon *ibeji* twin figures in Nigeria was effectively transferred to photographic images, and in many situations, the photograph of the living twin was used to *stand in the place of* the deceased. In this case, the “reading” of the photograph as a representation of someone who is not actually pictured denies one of the fundamental qualities of the photograph—the proof of something or someone having existed at a particular time and place (because if nothing else, this is the one thing that a photograph *can* prove, according to scholars like Berger and Tagg).<sup>200</sup>

In late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Ethiopia, the scientific or technical characteristics of photographs were understood by a very select group of the population—the educated nobility. Emperor Menelik II was interested in the mechanical process and spent time learning the specifics of how the photographic image emerged through the use of lenses, light and various photo-sensitive chemicals. Although it is unclear how widespread the mechanical understanding of the camera and photograph was in Ethiopia, the act of sitting or standing before the camera, then being reflected in a photograph was understood as capturing some vital characteristic of the actual person. In 1906, during *Ras* Makonnen’s funeral procession, photographs of the governor of Harar were carried by his mourners, and as Emperor Haile Selassie

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<sup>200</sup> See Berger’s argument in “The Ambiguity of the Photograph.”

describes in his autobiography, his father's friends threw themselves down and wept before his father's memorial, which included photographs of *Ras* Makonnen as well as his ceremonial robes, his crown, and his battle arms.<sup>201</sup> Similar to the clothes and royal regalia that *Ras* Makonnen once wore on his physical body, his photograph was understood to carry—in some way—characteristics, if not the essence, of the man himself.

The photograph's ability to evoke some sort of emotion or reaction in its viewers seems to be the only constant in its definition. However, this is true of numerous types of visual representations—paintings, sculptures, and photographs alike. What distinguishes photographic representations from others in different mediums? How is a photograph of the emperor figure differently in the realm of public visibility than a painted portrait? And how does one make the distinction between the two if a tradition of painting the monarchy realistically and according to similar tropes of representation did not exist in Ethiopia prior to the introduction of photographs?<sup>202</sup>

Historically, in Ethiopia, painted portraits of the upper nobility were rarely created and unlikely to be seen in the public realm. Following Haile Selassie's establishment of a school of fine arts in Addis Ababa, paintings that expanded beyond Ethiopia's traditional religious images began to emerge. However, the visibility of works by modern artists trained in Western traditions was again, for the most part, limited to the country's elite. Additionally, modern, abstract works were encouraged rather than representational or figurative works. As photographs became increasingly available to the urban masses through publication in newspapers, the idea of a realistic

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<sup>201</sup> Haile Selassie I, *Autobiography*, 24.

<sup>202</sup> Here, I am referring to painted portraits of Emperor Menelik and Emperor Haile Selassie, which were created in Western styles throughout the twentieth century. Although painting traditions existed in Ethiopia for centuries, they were primarily reserved for the religious realm.

representation of the human figure was not the only new one for a large number of viewers. The mass representation of the imperial body itself was a new concept as well. As opposed to the European development of the “language” of photography, which initially relied on established signs and symbols of aesthetics and representation, photography in Ethiopia truly was a form of representation *without a language*. Thus, what emerged in Ethiopia was a particular “language” of representation as a whole that was carefully constructed by those in power.

The exertion of state power embedded in the photograph and how the image entered the visible realm in Ethiopia are obvious. But what remains elusive in this case is how the photograph exerted its own agency on its viewer. From representation to interpretation, the meaning of the image necessarily needs to transfer from subject to viewer. The only common factor between the subject and the viewer is, of course, the image itself. As a visual object with aesthetic value (rather than as representation of human form), photographs function as devices “for securing the acquiescence of individuals in the network of intentionalities in which they are enmeshed.”<sup>203</sup>

Anthropologist Alfred Gell asserts that as a special form of technology, visual representations in the physical world are “enchanted” because they are “the outcome of some process of barely comprehensible virtuosity, that exemplifies an ideal of magical efficacy that people struggle to realize in other domains.”<sup>204</sup> Gell later asserts in *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* that art objects function as “agents” not because they have their own intentions, consciousness or awareness (according to how “agency” is typically defined by philosopher), but because as visual representations that do not occur naturally in the world and are created through human

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<sup>203</sup> Alfred Gell, “The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology,” *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, eds. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 43.

<sup>204</sup> Nicolas Thomas, “Foreword,” Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) viii.

intelligence, agency, effectively and with fluidity, can be transferred from creator to object and vice versa.<sup>205</sup> Because objects are not typically made without a reason, Gell argues that objects make references or “indexes” the public it was primarily made for.

The public, or “recipients” of a work of art (index) are, according to the anthropological theory of art, in a social relationship with the index, either as “patients” (in that the index causally affects them in some way) or as “agents” in that, but for them, this index would not have come into existence (they have caused it).<sup>206</sup>

Because the relationship between creator, object and viewer exists within a prescribed social space, according to an established social system, the creator’s exertion of “power” through the object is not arbitrarily exercised. The theory that Gell formulates is, in many respects, similar to psychoanalytic theories of the social screen and the gaze in that vision and ways of seeing are situated within the social system; however, Gell’s theory places a more direct correlation between the creator and the viewer. Here, I situate the subject of the photograph (Emperor Haile Selassie and his family) in the position of creator, not because the photographer’s role was inconsequential, but because the creation of meaning comes primarily from the subject in this case. Using Hyacinthe Rigaud’s portrait of King Louis XIV as an example [Figure 6.3], Gell states that “Rigaud’s agency, though still indisputably present and ‘primary’ is utterly subordinated to Louis XIV’s as patron of the art-making process and also as the one who has the power to appear precisely as he wishes to appear.”<sup>207</sup>

There has been a significant amount of scholarship on the physical presentation and visual re-presentation of the European monarchy, particularly Louis XIV.<sup>208</sup> Gell

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<sup>205</sup> Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 21-22.

<sup>206</sup> Gell, *Art and Agency*, 24.

<sup>207</sup> Gell, *Art and Agency*, 37.

<sup>208</sup> For a rich discussion of critical approaches to the “royal” body, see Regina Schulte, ed. *The Body of the Queen: Gender and Rule in the Courtly World, 1500-2000* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006).

refers to the French monarch's "obsession" with his physical appearance, which manifested itself in his patronage of painted portraits.<sup>209</sup> Much of what has been written on portraits and the monarchy have focused on the uses of clothing and self-presentation as a reflection of power; however, the vast majority of scholarship on "royal dressing" has also made the assertion that by the nineteenth century, the link between the body political and the body natural had been broken. Even the most splendid coverings could not transform the body of the ruler into an authoritarian sign of power.<sup>210</sup> Rather than representing monarchs as god-like embodiments of splendor, wealth, and riches the presentation of kings and queens shifted to reflect the ideals of increasingly democratized societies. Together with the increasing availability of the materials and styles once worn exclusively by the elite, extravagant and lavish clothing failed to elicit the same type of respect and awe in the twentieth century as it had in the past.

However, in Ethiopia, the emperor's body was, in fact, able to function as a symbol of power throughout most of the twentieth century, primarily because it existed within a social context in which the "index" of portraits of Haile Selassie were understood in relation to the value placed on authority *specifically in the Ethiopian context*. Although the particular roles and influences of the monarchy had changed from one emperor to another, what increasingly held the country together as an "imagined community," as Benedict Anderson would argue, was the myth of common

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<sup>209</sup> In the field of fashion (or costume) history, Louis XIV is often characterized as the first monarch in the Western world to realize that appearances could be used to alter people's perceptions of the monarchy, but visual representations of power existed long before Louis XIV began distributing portraits of himself for foreign envoys to take back to their own countries. Ancient Egyptian pharaohs wore false goatees as a symbol of authority, even when the ruler was a woman. Purple togas with gold embroidery were worn exclusively by emperors for state occasions during the Roman Empire. Objects worn on the body were understood to signify various social and cultural ideas and to carry the power of altering the visual presentation of self for thousands of years before the emergence of what Western historians consider the *modern* fashion system.

<sup>210</sup> Juliane Vogel, "The Double Skin: Imperial Fashion in the Nineteenth Century," in Regina Schulte, ed., *The Body of the Queen: Gender and Rule in the Courtly World, 1500-2000* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006) 216.



Figure 6.3: Portrait of King Louis XIV  
Hyacinthe Rigaud, 1701  
ARTstor, Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives

origin as descendents of the Queen of Sheba. Additionally, Emperor Haile Selassie's ability to trace his ancestry back to King Solomon through his father *Ras Makonnen* reaffirmed the monarch's "right" to the throne. However, the Ethiopian context of understanding the role of the monarchy during the twentieth century was also dependent on Ethiopia's role in the international arena. Haile Selassie's position of authority, though established and situated in a history of religion and cultural dominance in Ethiopia, simultaneously grew out of his status and influence beyond the country's borders. His appearance on the cover of major news sources abroad reciprocally legitimized his authority at home. Thus, although the development of the meaning of images was specific to the Ethiopian political and cultural condition, it was also influenced by the particular reception of the monarchical persona by the international public. The image of a powerful, individualistic Ethiopian body allowed the body at home to be received in relation to a global community of the self rather than being positioned solely as the other.

Gell's theory of the agency in art objects necessarily relies on the interconnectedness of people, and though he asserts that objects *can* have agency, it fundamentally relies on the existence of *human* agency. In visual objects created through human "interventions," meanings and the ability to provoke reactions in those who interact or see them originate in a culturally specific system. In the Ethiopian context, the body of the monarchy (the emperor and his children) reflected a system that was gradually entering into the "modern" world, despite being enmeshed in a long-standing history of religious traditions. What the photographed body recreated was an embodiment of the philosophical ideals associated with modernity such as the enlightenment ideals of rationality and mass literacy (Figures 5.5 and 5.6), individuality (Figures 5.3 and 5.4), and even representative democracy (photographs



of the emperor opening sessions of parliament could be found in numerous publications such as *Menen* and *The Addis Reporter* in the 1960s).<sup>211</sup> Additionally, as is apparent in images of the imperial body outside of Ethiopia (i.e., images of Emperor Haile Selassie on the covers of *Time Magazine*), the emperor was depicted as a man who was firmly implanted within the modern and the Western traditions of power and authority.

These two situations, though functioning within different historical and cultural contexts, served to maintain each other's modernist agendas. In the Western media, the image of a modern nation helped reorganize the racist, colonial structure of power (to some degree), creating a space within which a black African country could exist as a member of the international arena. For Ethiopians, their country, and thus the Ethiopia self could identify as a part of the global community. Being able to situate themselves outside of the role of other, the representation of Ethiopians served as a critical component of self-identification in the modern world.

### *Contextualizing the Clothed Body*

Although the Ethiopian royal family was at the center of the development of the country's visual imagining of the body, the 1960s marked a change in the representation of the Ethiopian citizen. As previously discussed, mass media publications began addressing the general public with articles that featured young Ethiopian men and women as citizens of a modern nation. Not only did magazines and newspapers report on events such as women's fashion shows and man's first walk on the moon, but they also began to draw a distinction between the urban population and

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<sup>211</sup> i.e., *Menen*, v. 8, no. 2, November 1963, cover image and two different photographs on pp. 4 and 5; *The Addis Reporter*, no. 5, April 1970, pp. 5.

its rural counterpart. In stark juxtaposition to images of young men and women engaging in the daily activities of the new, *modern* life, feature articles presented rural life in much the same way that Western publications such as *Life* and *National Geographic* depicted the lives of “uncivilized” and unclothed Africans.

In a two part series entitled “Faces of Ethiopia: The Wonders of Gambella,” *The Addis Reporter* featured rural Ethiopians in various states of undress.<sup>212</sup> The simplistic and naïve African is reflected in photographs of Gambellans engaging in everyday activities as well as numerous images of topless Gambellan women. In the accompanying text, the author writes:

I was so intrigued and fascinated by the Gambellans and the tales told about them that I had to go and visit them in their native grounds. Cleanliness is a matter of fact. And the girls are so dignified with their almost perfect bodies challenging all the beauties of the world. It needs pages and pages to write about the people of Gambella.<sup>213</sup>

Written in the same manner that American and European articles about Africans, this article and its accompanying photographic images presents those Ethiopians who are *not* a part of the new, urban population as the cultural other. Although the text quoted above was written by a white European, many of the photographs for the series were taken by an Ethiopian photographer, Habte Selassie Tafesse.

What makes this portrayal of an Ethiopian ethnic group distinct from other depictions of Africans by Western explorers, missionaries and colonial agents is the established history of self-representation in the Ethiopian media. For nearly forty decades, the Ethiopian body had been characterized as a modern ideal, dressed and presented to a great extent as no different from its Western counterpart. The

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<sup>212</sup> “Faces of Ethiopia: The Wonders of Gambella,” *The Addis Reporter*, v. 1, no. 28, July 11, 1969, 24-27 and “Clean Gambellans,” *The Addis Reporter*, v. 1, no. 30, July 25, 1969, 19-21.

<sup>213</sup> Dimitri Kyriazis, “Clean Gambellans,” *The Addis Reporter*, v. 1, no. 30, July 25, 1969, 19.

presentation of the rural Ethiopian body, identified as “Gambellan” rather than “Ethiopian,” marked the differentiation between the Ethiopian as modern citizen and the Ethiopian as other. In addition to the obvious difference in the way the two Ethiopian bodies are dressed, the representation of daily activities similarly distinguish the *embodiment* of modern ideals. Rather than photographs of rural Ethiopians cooking food over a fire or tending to their livestock, urban Ethiopians were shown walking through the city streets, reading books or participating in leisure activities.

These depictions in the mass media support the idea that there was a close correlation between urban life and Ethiopian nationalism and citizenship. Those individuals within the urban center were dressed in “modern” styles, educated in the modern system, and functioned as both subjects of the crown as well as the new parliamentary government, albeit its virtual lack of power in relation to the emperor’s.<sup>214</sup> As a process that neither occurred overnight nor was forced upon the country by external powers, what emerged in Ethiopia was a unique situation in which the opposition between the urban and the rural was significantly greater than any marked difference between Western and non-Western or traditional and modern. In other words, the properly clothed Ethiopian body made it both modern and relevant to the rest of the world.

The dressed body situated the Ethiopian subject in a history of Western tradition, but it likewise functioned as a marker of a new Ethiopian identity. In Figure 6.4, *Blatta* Ephrem Tewelde Medhem and an unnamed woman are positioned within the framework of a Western portrait aesthetic. The background as well as their clothing and the poses each of them hold closely mimic the style that was fashionable

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<sup>214</sup> The Ethiopian parliamentary system was founded by Emperor Haile Selassie in 1955, following his Silver Jubilee. In his revised constitution, the emperor retained effective power, but extended political participation to the people by allowing the lower house of parliament to become an elected body. However, for the most part, high government positions remained in the hands of the nobility, and positions were personally appointed by the emperor.

in European portrait studios throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. However, these portraits, and others like them taken at the time, signal the growing acceptance of styles and fashions introduced by the royal family. Although Ethiopia's nobility was more directly influenced by Western styles through education and official relationships with the U.S. and Europe, their attire was still under regulation by the imperial government. In this image, *Blatta* Ephrem wears a black tuxedo, an outfit that could easily be assigned to personal choice and/or styles, but in this instance, it is much more likely that the tuxedo serves as a uniform standardized by the state. The official ribbons and medals, signifying *Blatta* Ephrem's position within the imperial government, situate his appearance in the state's realm of acceptability. Much like a photograph without a language, the black tuxedo is meaningless in the Ethiopian context without a reference. Thus, the reference or "guidelines" that Emperor Haile Selassie and his family provided for the Ethiopian people provided the meaning behind the garment. The same principle applies for the white gown worn by the woman in the image. Her clothing and accessories were first made acceptable through the fashions introduced by Empress Menen and the princesses of the royal family. Additionally, her pose as well as her position upon a small pedestal reflects the shift in representation of Ethiopian women from images taken by Europeans to those in which Ethiopians themselves took control of their own self image [See Figure 2.1].



Figure 6.4: *Blatta* Ephrem Tewelde Medhen and unnamed woman  
Vararanian Studio, Ethiopia, 19 April 1952  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

One of the most significant effects of the royal family's presentation of self was the creation of a frame of reference for the clothed body in order for it to be understood in relation to the world around it. As images of Ethiopian bodies gradually began to depict more casual styles outside of the royal realm, the ways in which young citizens of the new urban space defined themselves started to reflect the ideals that Haile Selassie shaped for his country. Young Ethiopian men and women [Figure 6.5, 6.6 and 6.7] represented themselves as members of an international community rather than identifying solely with the extended family unit. The photographs of mostly unnamed men and women in the archives at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies are largely limited to university students, but during the 1960s and 1970s in Ethiopia, young, urban students comprised one of the most dynamic social groups in the nation at the time, active in shaping urban culture and a new commodity-based economy as well as pushing for political reform.

Portrait photographs of university students directly reflect the embodiment of modern fashions among Ethiopian youth, but by the time photographs became widely available and accessible to the growing group, a vast majority of urban youth had already adopted the styles introduced by members of the royal family. Although few portrait photographs of the non-elite were taken before the 1960s, photographs of the emperor at graduation ceremonies and official visits to schools demonstrate that students in public education exclusively wore Western-style clothing, and there were only a few instances in which traditional attire was worn (i.e., ceremonies and performances).





Figure 6.5: Group of Young Men  
Photographer Unknown, Ethiopia, 1962/3  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

With regards to proper attire in public schools, the use of uniforms in state-sponsored schools was widespread by the 1950s. In this case, the state exerted a direct

form of power over the appearance of the student body. However, by the time students reached the university level, they were free to dress according to their personal styles, as long as it was “socially appropriate,” which typically meant students dressed exclusively in new, modern fashions. In the photograph of eight young university students from 1962/3 (1955 E.C.), all of the men are dressed in contemporary styles, and the only indication that this photograph is from Ethiopia is the traditional-style rug on the floor of the studio [Figure 6.5]. Additionally, photographs taken outside of the university environment tended to place an emphasis on the casual nature of the social relationship between the subjects. In Figure 6.5, despite the static character of the posed photograph, each of the men holds a pose that signifies a relaxed or informal setting. The man standing on the far right rests his knee on a stool behind the man to the left while he casually loops his right thumb around the belt loop of his slacks. Several of the men stand with their hands in their pant’s pockets, a pose that would have been unlikely had they been dressed in the traditional, white cotton *shama*.

In addition to the relaxed nature of these photographs, images of Ethiopian youth also reveal the type of clothing that became “normalized” during the 1960s. Although the style is casual, none of the men in Figure 6.5 wear jeans, t-shirts, or shorts. As opposed to photographs of urban youth from Bamako, Mali from the same time frame, the style of clothing worn by Ethiopian men and women reflected the specific ideals placed upon a *modern* appearance by the royal family. The men in Figure 6.5 do not necessarily reflect the formality in appearance that was presented by those in political power; however, they lack the extreme informality that urban youth in other areas of the world displayed at the time. Despite foreign influences on the Ethiopian public through mass media sources, the extent to which European and American popular culture proliferated in Ethiopia was strictly controlled by the government. For Ethiopians who did not travel abroad, their relationship with Western



culture was limited to a narrow range of government-approved aspects of urban life. For example, during the 1960s, *The Addis Reporter* presented feature stories on the American Jazz Dance Group, Yugoslavian artist Ana Marija Sulentic, and man's first walk on the moon, highlighting the individual astronauts who were a part of the historic event.<sup>215</sup> Thus, much of what young Ethiopians were exposed to fostered a particular engagement with modernity, one in which formality was stressed and informal youth culture was left out.

The emphasis on formality in Ethiopian dressing styles is much more apparent in photographs of students taken in an official university capacity. Graduation images, both portraits such as Figure 6.6 and photojournalistic photographs from graduation ceremonies, were the predominant means by which young Ethiopians were seen by other Ethiopians in the print media. Emperor Haile Selassie's role as "the father of Ethiopian education" was supported by photographs of the emperor handing out diplomas at graduation ceremonies. Additionally, newspapers began to include congratulatory announcements for university graduates in the "society" pages alongside wedding and birth announcements. Formal portraits of graduates like the one in Figure 6.6 were printed in newspapers, presenting the Ethiopian public with successful young, modern Ethiopian citizens.

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<sup>215</sup> *The Addis Reporter*, v. 1, no. 26, June 27, 1969; v. 1, no. 27, July 4, 1969; v. 1, no. 28, July 11, 1969, respectively.



Figure 6.6: Two Unnamed Women  
National Photo Studio, Addis Ababa, c. 1965  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

The image in Figure 6.6 depicts a graduation portrait of two young women. They are dressed almost identically in a black cap and gown with a white blouse or dress underneath. The accessories they wear are simple and nondescript, and the graduation scene is made complete by the rolled up diplomas that each of the women hold in their hands. The style and composition of this photograph is typical of other graduation portraits that were taken at the time, including ones that were printed in newspapers such as *Addis Zemen* and *The Addis Reporter* during the 1960s. The relative simplicity of the image and the lack of individualistic elements to their clothing and accessories places an emphasis on the fact that these portraits functioned as instructional images, allowing the viewer to imagine him/herself in place of the person photographed. Graduation portraits, like wedding portraits and birth announcements that likewise appeared in newspapers, allowed young Ethiopians to either position themselves as subjects who actively contributed to the development of society or to imagine ways in which they could potentially fulfill the role.

Gradually, the appearance and clothing of young Ethiopians began to take on more individualistic elements. Urban fashions were certainly influenced by American and African American fashions at the time. Figure 6.7 depicts a group of young men and women from the early 1970s. Although the men wear the typical slacks, button-down shirt and blazer, the women's styles are indicative of a change in young, urban fashion. The woman on the left wears a miniskirt, which just a few years previous would have been condemned by the general public as well as the mass media. (See discussion of Miss Dire Dawa on page 166.) The woman on the right is dressed in fashionable bellbottoms and wears her hair in a style made popular by African American women during the 1970s.



Figure 6.7: Group of Young Men and Women  
Photographer Unknown, Ethiopia, c. 1972  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

By the 1970s, Ethiopian fashion had emerged as a system that functioned relatively independent of its Western counterpart. Women's fashion shows often presented modernized styles of traditional textiles, and new ways of wearing Ethiopian clothing became increasingly acceptable outside of the religious or ceremonial realm. Young men and women often wore combinations of modern attire and traditional scarves and textiles. However, in Ethiopia, the further evolution of fashion came to an abrupt end during the mid 1970s. The student-led socialist revolution led to a military coup that overthrew the emperor in 1974. In the years that followed, Ethiopia struggled through a civil war, known as the Red Terror, which claimed thousands of lives and caused even more to flee the country.<sup>216</sup> Institutions of higher learning became stagnant, and the once fluid exchange between Ethiopia, her African neighbors and European and American allies came to an end. Monuments were toppled, statues defaced, and the image of the carefree, relaxed, university student and the chic, urban Ethiopian citizen was replaced with the stark, utilitarian uniforms of socialism. Although the idealized vision of a socialist nation in Ethiopia was shattered as quickly as it was borne, Emperor Haile Selassie's image of Ethiopia as an active member of the modern, global community, which he had spent decades so carefully and meticulously crafting, came to an end as well.

The "image" of the powerful and ever-adapting Ethiopian empire was shattered through the visual image in 1973 when British reporter Jonathan Dimbleby produced a film depicting the famine in Wollo Province that claimed an estimated 200,000 lives. The images from his film, *The Unknown Famine*, stood in stark juxtaposition with the photographs of the emperor and his family in large, lavish

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<sup>216</sup> The actual death toll is unknown. A victims-rights group in Addis Ababa has registered 10,000 deaths, but Amnesty International estimates that the death toll could be as high as 500,000.

palaces, holding sumptuous feasts for visiting dignitaries, driving expensive cars, and traveling the world. Portraits of the royal family that for decades had served as an indication of the power and *ability* of the monarchy as well as the country itself to adapt and survive in a rapidly modernizing, increasingly global world no longer carried that authority.

However, more than thirty years after the fall of the monarchy, these portraits are reemerging as signs of power. Portraits of the royal family are highly visible throughout the urban landscape—on cars and taxis, on clothing and accessories, in store-front windows and on the cover of books and magazines. In a country where the conception of national identity has been challenged repeatedly, a significant amount of cultural and historical dignity still lingers in the legendary past. The emperor and the nation maintain a certain sense of legitimacy *through* the photographic image.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Conclusion

#### The Life of Royal Images

*Once a father came with his two sons, who were 14 and 18 years old. He said he wanted to have them photographed. So I did it. When he came back to pick up the prints, he said: "Are you making fun of us?" "What's the problem?" I asked. He answered that the photograph of his eldest son was not correct. He said the ears did not correspond to his son's ears. I took him to the mirror and explained that photography captures what exists, exactly like a mirror does. But he insisted that I had confused his son's ears with somebody else's. I couldn't say anything, so I promised him that I would come up with a solution. As soon as he came back the following day, I said to him: "You were right. The other guy came, and we exchanged ears, look." He looked at the portrait and said: "Yes, now I recognize my son's ears."<sup>217</sup>*

Shafic el Soussi, photographer

The arguments and evidence presented in this project fundamentally bring us back to the question of modern vision—how Ethiopians pictured themselves fundamentally depended on how they *saw* themselves. Like the father who insisted that his son's ears had been confused with someone else's and the shock and disapproval that greeted Henry Peach Robinson's *Fading Away*, the act of reading a photograph image is doubtless one that has been learned, one that is culturally specific and particular to a certain time in history.

For Ethiopians, the parameters of the public photograph was defined by the royal family, and the position that the photographic image took in both the private and the public realms were strongly influenced by how the emperor and his family crafted the representation of their own bodies. Additionally, as this study has demonstrated,

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<sup>217</sup> Quoted in *The Vehicle: Picturing Moments of Transition in a Modernizing Society* [Exhibition Catalogue] (Beirut: Lebanon: Arab Image Foundation, 1999) 11.

photographs of the dressed body not only affected the manner in which the Self was perceived in relation to the Other (both the Ethiopian Other as the modern citizen encountered his/her countrymen in the busy metropolis and the Western Other), but these photographs also created an active and viable fashion system.

The Ethiopian fashion system, though borne as a result of Ethiopia's encounter with the rest of the world, was also uniquely Ethiopian, and at the same time, uniquely defined by Ethiopia's encounter with and development of the broader philosophical traditions of modernity. The glamorous ball gowns worn by the princesses paved the way for the "modern," Western wedding gowns that Ethiopian brides began to wear in the 1960s. The classic black and white tuxedos worn by the men of the royal family likewise set the precedent for young Ethiopian men who wanted to reflect, through their clothing and on their bodies, their sense of engagement with modernity.

This project is, by no means, a comprehensive study of Ethiopian photography and fashion during the twentieth century. Rather, this has been an attempt to consider a non-Western system of dressing the body within theoretical parameters that have not previously been considered. The lack of critical discourse on non-Western fashions brings to the forefront a larger problem of the study of non-Western culture, history and art. African art and photography, for example, do not exist under entirely different parameters and should not be relegated to a cursory examination of both their aesthetics and function within society. However, at the same time, the particular circumstances under which "modern" African culture developed are quite different from its Western counterparts. Thus, the study of non-Western cultures, especially that which emerged after European contact and within the restrictions of colonialism, requires a delicate balance between established theoretical frameworks that have most commonly emerged from Western centers and a careful consideration of indigenous philosophical systems of thought.



What this project seeks to re-“imagine” is a way of thinking about the practice of dressing and displaying the body in a rapidly modernizing African country during a period that is often overshadowed by the all-encompassing presence of colonialism. Stepping beyond the constraints of such phrases as “the civilizing mission” and “the colonial gaze,” I sought to consider self-representations of modern Ethiopian citizens as active agents in the creation of their own image. From photographs of the country’s powerful and charismatic monarch to the “fashionable” representations of the princes and princesses, Ethiopians themselves played a central role in creating their own desirable bodies. Through the modern mass media, the royal family effectively conveyed its political and cultural agenda of creating a modern nation, complete with modern citizens.

Today in Ethiopia, styles of clothing are as varied as the streets of New York City and London. From high-end boutique shops on Bole Avenue to the traditional textiles sold in Shiromeda, Addis Ababa is teeming with colors and styles that are uniquely Ethiopian. Despite the interest in fashions that come from Europe or the U.S., the fashionable Ethiopian youth are equally attracted to designers and clothing that reflect an Ethiopian aesthetic. In June 2006, the first Ethiopian fashion magazine was launched by a group of young, fashionable entrepreneurs who recognized the need for an Ethiopian perspective on world fashion. Modeled after international fashion magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*, *My Fashion* magazine attempts to bring international fashion home to Ethiopia. From cover stories about Ethiopian celebrities such as actress Sara Nuru (October 2006) and cultural pieces about the return of an Aksum obelisk from Italy (December 2006), the magazine brings together Ethiopian high fashion and culture. Rather than models wearing the latest fashions from European runways, the fashion spreads depict Ethiopian models wearing modern interpretations of traditional clothing by local designers.

The idea of “self-fashioning” has been an important aspect of Ethiopian culture for centuries. Living in relative isolation from foreign influences until the mid-nineteenth century, Ethiopia and its citizens defined themselves according to their own standards. Even as the country emerged in the international arena and become a strong supporter of Pan-African efforts against European oppression, Ethiopia still defined itself as being unique and separate from the rest of Africa and certainly the rest of the world. Whether through her religious connections to Christianity or her non-European colony status, Ethiopia has maintained a status of “difference,” and to this day continues to assert a distinctive sense of “Ethiopian-ness” through the almost legendary status of her last emperor, Haile Selassie I, the King of Kings.

## POSTSCRIPT

In the past few years as I've worked on this project, there has been a surge of interest and excitement over photographs of the Ethiopian monarchy. Numerous books and previously unpublished images have been made available to the public. Most recently in 2007, an exhibition of photographs by the Boyadjian family, which included numerous images of the royal family, was held in Paris at the *Jeu de Paume*, and photographs by Shimilis Desta, one of Haile Selassie's court photographers, were shown at the Photographer's Gallery in London.<sup>218</sup> If the ever-increasing popularity of the monarch's image in Ethiopia is any indication, Emperor Haile Selassie's status as a cultural icon has reached new heights. In Addis Ababa, it is impossible to navigate the street without being bombarded with images of Ethiopia's last imperial couple and other visual references to the monarchy.

The afterlife of royal images in Ethiopia is significant in the construction of national identity in contemporary Ethiopia as well as understanding the legacy of the monarchy in the country's history. Images of Emperor Haile Selassie and Empress Menen often function in much the same way as monuments or statues erected to commemorate the lives and accomplishments of significant figures. However, as opposed to monuments or specific structures created in commemoration, the proliferation of Haile Selassie's image in the cityscape removes the emperor from the shrine-like aspect of a specific site where spectators could revel in the memory (or the imagined memory) of the emperor. Instead, the engagement with memory, heritage and nostalgia is a constant and continual process.

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<sup>218</sup> *Les Boyadjians: Photographes arméniens à la cour du Négus*, curated by Abebe Berhanu (19 June – 2 September 2007)

Although in many ways, the legacy of the monarchy appears to be continual, the years of the Dergue regime effectively served to sever the ties between the monarchy and the Ethiopian people for more than a decade. However, at the same time, the challenges and hardships the country faced as a result of the military coup brought about a longing or nostalgia for the return of the monarchy. Following the Red Terror and decades of political, cultural and educational oppression, the time and space prior to the Dergue evolved in the collective memory and increasingly became a nostalgic vision of peace and prosperity.

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym examines the history of nostalgia, or “hypochondria of the heart,” as an active force in the construction of collective memories and national identities. Recalling Ernest Renan’s statement, Boym claims that amnesia is an essential factor in the making of a nation. Forgetting the past, or what Benedict Anderson describes as “collective amnesia,” is a crucial aspect of re-remembering it. She claims that in the national ideology, individual longing for the past is transformed into a collective belonging that relies on past sufferings that transcend individual memories.<sup>219</sup> In this collective belonging, which is situated more in the past than in the present, historical defeats and failures figure as prominently in uniting the nation as victories.

According to Boym, nostalgia is dependent on the modern conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time. Therefore, the past can *only* be visited through memories, and memories in turn cannot be situated in reality. However, nostalgia is much more complex than mere memory. Nostalgia necessarily assumes a highly emotive response. Boym positions the origins of nostalgia in particular historical circumstances:

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<sup>219</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 15.

Nostalgia was diagnosed at a time when art and science had not yet entirely severed their umbilical ties and when the mind and the body—internal and external well-being—were treated together. This was a diagnosis of a poetic science.<sup>220</sup>

Boym further relates nostalgia to the ancient myth of the return home, or *nostos*, a return that would take the weary traveler from the darkness of unconsciousness to the light of consciousness.

In Ethiopia, there are numerous aspects of Ethiopian history and culture that serve as nostalgic recollections of this “return home” to a more peaceful and prosperous time, even if it is only imagined as such. The legend of the Queen of Sheba, the significance of the obelisks and churches of Axum, the victory over the Italians at the Battle of Adwa and the fact that Ethiopia remained independent of colonialism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century all serve specific purposes in the reconstruction of the Ethiopian past. Visual representations of the emperor contribute to the national imaginary, but for many Ethiopians, the memory of the monarchy is much more immediate and concrete than many other historical references to the past due to the fact that the monarchy came to an end just three decades prior.

Boym distinguishes between two kinds of nostalgia, though she claims that they are not absolute types, but rather “tendencies, ways of giving shape and meaning to longing.”<sup>221</sup> Restorative nostalgia emphasizes *nostos*, or the return home, proposing to rebuilt the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, “the imperfect process of remembrance.”<sup>222</sup> Boym elaborates on restorative nostalgia, asserting that these nostalgics “do not think of themselves as nostalgics; they believe that their project is about truth.” She asserts that

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<sup>220</sup> Boym 7.

<sup>221</sup> Boym 41.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

with restorative nostalgia, it is necessary to distinguish between the habits of the past and the habits of the restoration of the past. Relying on Eric Hobsbawm's distinction between customs and invented traditions, she argues that invented tradition, rather than customs, actually fuels the spread of restorative nostalgia. Invented tradition "builds on the sense of loss of community and cohesion offers a comforting collective script for individual longing."<sup>223</sup>

On the other hand, reflective nostalgia suggests new flexibility, and the focus is not on recovering what is believed to be absolute truth, but on the mediation of history and the passage of time.<sup>224</sup> Boym states that:

If restorative nostalgia ends up reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize time, reflective nostalgia cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space.<sup>225</sup>

Though reflective nostalgia relies on traditions invented as a result of some sort of rupture from the past, it perpetually defers the homecoming, recognizing and welcoming distance between the self and the referent.<sup>226</sup>

To some extent, both types of nostalgia are in effect in contemporary Ethiopia. Although minor efforts to "restore" the monarchy have been made, the movement lacks wide scale public support, and until Crown Prince Asfa Wosen's death in 1997, there was a great deal of distrust over the heir to the throne.<sup>227</sup> Due in part to his participation in the attempt to overthrow Haile Selassie in 1960 and his apparent desire to live abroad rather than in his own country, Asfa Wosen lost favor in Ethiopia long before the military coup that ousted the emperor in 1974. Additionally, Asfa Wosen's

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<sup>223</sup> Boym 42.

<sup>224</sup> Boym 49.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> The Crown Council of Ethiopia

son Prince Yera Jacob had been raised and educated abroad. The Ethiopian public could not easily accept a restoration of the monarchy.

The nostalgic remembrance of the monarchy functions much more strongly in the reflective sense. The longing for the past in Ethiopia is deeply embedded in the traumatic loss and suffering that began in the mid-1970s, and in many ways, continues today. The trauma of the 1970s and 1980s effectively created a desire to return to a better time because even if the emperor and the monarchy were imperfect, those times were far better than the massacres and famines that occurred after Haile Selassie was deposed. Thus, the emperor's numerous images, typically in portrait form, function as reminders or recollections, and as imperfect as the recollections may be, these images support the idea that there was a certain legitimacy and nobility in the monarchy that does not exist in the present conditions.

The photographs that proliferate of the emperor throughout the contemporary cityscape tend to be images of the monarch in full imperial regalia, both traditional robes and modern suits, although images of Haile Selassie as a younger man tend to be more common. Earlier photographs of the emperor (from the 1930s) more commonly depicted him in traditional robes, and the image taken by Bedros Boyadjian in Figure 8.1 has become one of the most recognizable photographs of Haile Selassie around the world.



Figure 8.1: Emperor Haile Selassie I  
Bedros Boyadjian, Ethiopia, c. 1932  
Courtesy of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University



Reprinted in various forms, this particular representation of Haile Selassie has now come to signify an “imagined community” that exceeds the borders of a single nation. As a source of pride and identity in Ethiopia, the legacy of Emperor Haile Selassie has been greatly supported by his status as a symbol for African pride and diasporic unity. Although visual representations of Haile Selassie have been common in Jamaica since the beginning of the Rastafarian movement, his image can be found throughout the Caribbean, not only as a reference to Rastafarians, but also as a source of Black pride and solidarity [Figure 8.2]. In popular culture, the Rastafarian connections to Reggae music, Bob Marley, and praising ideas of love and peace have likewise made the Ethiopian emperor a counter-culture symbol of rebellion. Suburban American teenagers wear t-shirts with the emperor’s image, sometimes only recognizing his association with Rastafarians rather than his political role as the leader of an African nation.

As images of the emperor traveled through space and time, the references in them have changed, and the processes of decoding the messages embedded in the images are no longer the same. These photographs now hold little value as models of modernity and the *modernized* body, but in a strange way they do still signify progress. Today, as images of Haile Selassie take on more abstract ideas and qualities, the yearning for the past brings the emperor again into the forefront of Ethiopian aspirations for change. Although as nostalgic articulations of the past into the future, there is little reality that actually drives or motivates change, the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, King of Kings of Ethiopia, Elect of God, Power of Trinity the First, Emperor of Ethiopia still stands unquestionably at the forefront of his country as a symbol of power.



Figure 8.2: Emperor Haile Selassie on Hood of Land Rover  
Photo by author, Soufriere, Saint Lucia, 19 January 2008

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### **Newspaper and Magazines**

- *Addis Zemen* (1940/41 – 1979)
- *Addis Reporter* (1969)
- *Menen* (1955-1965)

## GLOSSARY

<i>abun</i>	“bishop”; <i>abuna</i> when used with a proper noun
<i>ato</i>	a title equivalent to “Mr.”
<i>blatta</i>	a title generally signifying learning, given in the twentieth century to government officials at the director-general level
<i>dejazmatch</i>	“commander of the gate,” a political/military title below <i>ras</i>
<i>hakim</i>	“physician,” used as an equivalent to the title “Dr.”
<i>lij</i>	“child,” honorific title generally reserved for sons of the royal family and the upper nobility
<i>negus</i>	king
<i>netela</i>	cotton cloth used by women to cover the head and shoulders
<i>ras</i>	“head,” the highest traditional political/military title under <i>negus</i>
<i>shama</i>	traditional hand-woven cotton cloth wrapped around the torso and over the shoulders